

THE FASCINATOR

A Novel by

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To Sally Paine

from Tom and Theodora



CHAPTER ONE It was a few days before Indian summer and the sky was blue. It reached between the buildings and outlined them with an incredible azure. On Manhattan Island these blue days are miracles. Unattended, unforeseen, they dawn over the tidal river; they set across the Hudson. They flower untroubled by the city's breath, the staining breath of man.

Yet Ellen's breath, as she walked along Fifth Avenue, left no visible stain. It did not show before her face as it passed lightly and silently between her lips. She was walking rather slowly with her hands in a muff and

looked demure, even old-fashioned. Ellen wore no hat and the swirling gusts of autumn wind blew her hair about. At one moment she would be mysterious, with falling locks around her eyes, and then, in an instant, the lines of her face would spring out bold and clean and the mass of her short hair would streak back as though fingers had pulled it behind her ears.

Autumn is the time of year for exalted thoughts. The languor of summer, the crushing nostalgia of spring are left behind, while winter is a vague area, like the blank spaces on a map. Such thoughts mount up into the azure which receives them as though they were birds. The falling leaves lend them a measure of sobriety and of regret, but do not maim their soaring wings.

Ellen was making good resolutions. She sometimes tried to better herself in this way and today was perfect for it. "And I'll read at least one book a week this winter," she was telling herself with virtuous relish, "a good book, that is, on a subject which Sandy chooses for me so we can have discussions, and I'll be more motherly to Janey and not act like one woman to another, and I'll be tidier and perhaps"—here Ellen quickened her pace from joy—"perhaps if I do all these things they'll let me have a son."

Ellen said 'they' because she did not believe in God, but she had never quite been able to purge herself of the sensation that someone was watching over her, or rather, around her, everywhere, and that this presence would barter for the good of her soul.

The Hunters—Ellen, her husband Sandy, and their daughter Jane—had just returned to New York for the winter. During the summer they had rented a cottage near the Hudson, and Sandy had commuted by means of a community motor boat for businessmen. Ellen, for one, was glad to be back in the city. They had been leading such a quiet life that the very crowds in the street acted on her blood like wine. It was a complete change. What with the fresh sparkling morning, the hurrying people, and her resolutions, she felt light-headed. Ellen shrugged and pressed her hands together in her muff, a sign of excitement and happiness. As she walked she looked into the windows of the big stores that line the Avenue. Here innumerable goods were displayed. Startlingly new, they showed from store to store a similarity which seemed to take no thought of disguise. Then too, the women who shopped in them formed a sea of army and wore its uniform proudly. Sometimes those who went to less expensive shops tried to imitate this uniform, but they were easily found out. A glance sufficed. The army was clad in furs—stoles, this fall—in open-toed shoes with high heels, and in precious stones squarely set. As for the gowns beneath the furs, Paris had laid a hand on them somewhere, but it had not helped much.

Now and then a creature who was utterly different would appear among this throng: a stern Spanish woman, for instance, of the Moorish type, drawing her brows together; or a cheap little tart, like a flower in a

red skirt; or else the demure Ellen with her pale face and yellow eyes. Male glances shifted towards these oddities, since even Solomon, so it is told, yearned for strange women.

Ellen entered one of the shops at last, but not without noticing in the windows that she was being followed. Who cared? Inside the shop—which was very well-bred in tone and had that reputation on the Avenue—she paused to look around, and then, almost indolently, bought some gloves and a scarf. Taking the elevator, she went up to the third floor where there was a special little shop inside the big one. It was supposed to be exclusive and it was certainly expensive. Ellen bought all her dresses here, for Sandy's earnings as a young attorney were comparatively modest and he allowed Ellen to accept a dress allowance from her mother.

The woman in charge of this shop within a shop had been to school with Ellen. Her name was Geraldine West and she liked to be called GW because it made her feel important. Big executives were often called by their initials. It meant one didn't have the nerve to call them by their first names, but they nonetheless escaped the stigma of Mr., Mrs., or Miss. It was at once snobbish and comradely, a sign of the times and of their success therein.

Geraldine greeted Ellen by drifting swiftly forward. Or was it a drift? Geraldine was never certain. No matter how much she practiced, her own rather stumpy walk lurked somewhere behind it all.

"Ellen!" she exclaimed. "How nice to see you again."

"Hello, Gerry," said Ellen indifferently and without smiling.

'Bitch,' thought Geraldine angrily. 'I've always hated her, and what an ego to wear no make-up and no hat either! She's not that young and pretty.'

Geraldine herself was heavily painted, and although virtue was almost a sickness with her, she looked ready to walk the streets. There was, however, a dry caked quality to her face; nothing glistened, just as nothing glistened in her courageous and virgin heart which the fashion world had begun to wither. Ellen and Geraldine were the same age, in their late twenties, yet Ellen had a youth that, in the other, was missing or gone by. Ellen's eyes sparkled. Her skin shone where it was stretched over bone; that thick camellia skin tinged with ivory, which did not tan easily, which never blushed. Ellen's lashes and eyebrows were lighter than her hair and because she never darkened them they gave her a candid Quaker look which was belied by her sinuous gestures. Then too, there was a deep curve in the set of her lips. This curve was remarkable in a mouth that was not thick, and it was pointed up today by the fact that she wore no lipstick.

"I suppose you've come to get a few glad rags," said Geraldine in a bright but rather dragging voice. "I've been thinking of you lately and I have my eye on several."

"I'd like to see an afternoon dress," said Ellen, look-

ing vaguely around the smart little salon with its stuffed chairs. There was a table at one end, generally used for a display of some sort—gloves, or sweaters, or imitation jewelry. Today, covered by a straw mat, it held a score of glazed china figures.

Seeing Ellen's glance turned in that direction, Geraldine said: "Aren't they divine?" And she added in the manner of one who holds a trump card: "Zanic's, of course."

Zanic was one of those phenomenal people who, after many years of obscurity, suddenly strike it rich. He was a sculptor. His talent was in the simple, manly, and even strong quality of his work, but this talent was no longer apparent. To become popular he had had to forget it, and he had done so seemingly without distress. In a world bounded by the abstract and the photographic, there had been no place for it. Zanic's work now was a sort of Pierre-Louÿs version of antiquity. It was flavored as well by the current ideal of America. Women, fighting in the commercial world, encased in their girdles and their uplifts as in armor, loved Zanic's conception of them. Men simply thought it sexy. It stirred up their faltering virility crushed by financial worry or by the reports of sexologists.

Ellen had never heard of Zanic. Now she went over to the table and fingered the little china objects with a smile; girls whose length of neck and thigh was improbable, gazelles who resembled women. The Arcadian wistfulness was like a sweet syrup poured over them.

It amused Ellen to imagine her husband's horror were she to bring one home. Sandy was devoted to the arts in a serious and intellectual way. Ellen's gaze now flicked Geraldine as if to say mockingly: 'What a gullible fool you are,' but although her eyes spoke, there was no thought behind them, none for Geraldine, anyway.

"Come on into the dressing room," said Geraldine, "and I'll bring you a selection." She led the way briskly and Ellen followed with her indolent walk.

Left alone in the little booth, Ellen pulled the dress over her head and turned around like a cat. The mirrors on three sides of her reflected the perfections and imperfections of her form now clothed only in a silk chemise. This garment, which had been made by hand in France, and worked with many difficult points and stitches, was now old. Nonetheless it was very becoming, and beneath it Ellen had negligently gartered her stockings above her knee.

There was something delicate and feline in Ellen's figure. Its very faults seemed attractive. But there was nothing faulty in her small, perfect bosom which tilted upward and needed no support.

Geraldine returned with several dresses over her arms. 'Oh, God,' she thought with irritation, 'why can't she wear a girdle and slip, like everybody?' 'Everybody' meant those other chosen few who came to buy their dresses in the personal-service shop. "You're a big girl now. You should wear a foundation," she said, as though making a joke.

Ellen glanced through the mirror into Gerry's face whose painted mouth was set in a smile. "It's different when you're married," she said, "and have to look nice undressing." She said it without malice, but Geraldine would never have believed it, and thought the words shocking as well as mean.

Ellen chose one of the dresses quickly and a seamstress was called for alterations. "I want it for this afternoon," said Ellen, "because I'm going to a cocktail party."

"You shall have it," Geraldine agreed, "and if you're going to Ray Sullivan's by any chance I might drop in, so we'll see each other there."

Ray Sullivan was a well-known fashion photographer. Geraldine did not really think Ellen was going there, but she wanted to make Ellen's party sound stodgy by comparison and to show that she, GW, was in the swing.

Ellen disappointed her. "That's the name, I guess," she mumbled, struggling into her dress. Then she ran her fingers through her hair which was naturally wavy and fell into place at once. "He's a client of Sandy's," she said.

Geraldine saw her to the boundaries of the salon which was her territory and, after Ellen was out of sight, said to her salesgirl: "Can you believe what some people think they can get away with? That mousy woman!"

And the saleswoman answered: "Goodness, GW, I feel naked before I put on my face in the morning."

“And I bet she didn’t even know who Zanic was,” said Geraldine. “The way these married friends of mine let themselves go!”

Ellen, sauntering out into the street, was struck once more by the matchless temper of this fall morning. Everything stood out so clearly: the women in their furs, the brilliant cars, the heavy buses. They seemed to have a lucidity, an extra dimension, somehow. That man, for instance, leaning against the wall, with his ugly livid face and a rose between his teeth. The flower, which he had bought nearby, was of a dark and brilliant red. Its blossom lay against his cheek like another divinely beautiful mouth set beside his own. The difference was grotesque. He stayed there immobile, leaning against the window of the store, and looked into Ellen’s eyes.

To hide a pang of hysteria or dismay, Ellen put her muff up to her face. Then she turned and walked quickly off.



CHAPTER TWO Ellen and Sandy Hunter lived at Seventy-fifth Street between Lexington and Third Avenue. Their apartment was on the third floor of No. 161 and stretched from back to front. The house had once been the rather modest dwelling of a single family, the kind of place a couple took when they were starting to make money and hoped to go on to better things. It was a house of passage, a place to alight between the flat-over-a-store of early marriage and the sumptuous dream of reclaimed Riverside or Fifth Avenue. This, of course, was before cities got overcrowded

and before the cost of living put private houses more or less out of reach. Yet No. 161 had retained its character even now that it was broken up into flats, floor by floor. It remained unloved, gloomy, dry, merely a step towards better living. Its only attraction was an atmosphere of hope which mingled with the air in its rooms. As houses go, it was neither old nor new, comfortable nor wretched, beautiful nor ugly. Built of a yellowish grain that had never been stone, it was five stories high and had a sooty terrace on top with a room leading out to it which was now termed a penthouse. Ellen had often coveted this penthouse which had more character than their own floor.

The Hunters had three rooms, not counting the kitchen and bathroom. The largest room was in back and was Janey's nursery. It looked out on a drab little yard consisting of black pebbles and a solitary locust tree. The caretaker's wife was the only person ever seen in the yard and she had once used it for hanging her washing. As the tenants had objected, she had stopped but she had taken a revenge. She was now rigorously strict about the yard. She would allow no dogs in it and no children. She had even forbidden the beautiful Angora cat belonging to the second floor tenants, who was so discreet that he might have been an angel. Thus the yard had become a dead place and a place of strays. Even the tree seemed to gasp for air beneath its blanket of soot.

Outside one of the windows was an old-fashioned fire

escape. By leaning out and over it one could see other yards, each with its high wall and each following the trend of the block. Those near Lexington were almost gardens, while those on the other side of No. 161 were increasingly filled with refuse and festooned with washing. The exception was the school playground next door. Here, if one were far enough up, one could watch the decorous games (not play) of the children, with nuns weaving amongst them. Half way down the block from Lexington Avenue a Roman Catholic church stretched its grey walls and a big stained-glass window was lit up at night for Janey's pleasure.

At the front of the Hunters' flat there were two rooms: one very small, where Ellen and Sandy slept, and the other a fair-sized living room. The kitchen, which had once been a pantry, and the bathroom were in between and opened onto the hall.

Ellen had returned from her shopping and now stood at the living-room window, watching for Janey to come home from her nursery school. The children from the Roman Catholic school next door were playing in the street during their recess—rather, the boys were playing, and the girls, like a different kind of animal altogether, were talking and whispering in groups. Ellen wondered if it was their religious education that had turned their attention prematurely inward, had made them more aware, more afraid, more secret and inhibited so that they would no longer romp and jump and throw their limbs about.

Above the shouting of the boys at play there sounded interminably the rumble of the Third Avenue El. Everybody said the El was doomed. They had already cut the ends off it. Personally, Ellen was sorry, and she took it whenever possible.

Seventy-fifth Street between Lexington and Third was, like the yards, in complete harmony with No. 161. It was a transition, a path leading from poverty into, not wealth, but un-poverty. The houses near Lexington were fairly large and some even had garages beneath. A few trees lined the sidewalks. Towards Third the houses grew darker, grimmer, with fire escapes on their front sides and meager shops on their ground floors. The trees, as though withered by the blast of the El, grew first stunted and then stopped altogether. The sidewalk itself became rougher, made of slate slabs instead of cement, and the restless dust upon the surface of the slabs was never swept away.

Ellen pressed her nose against the pane like a wistful child; a trick, in fact, that she had practiced since early years. Ellen's nose was amusing rather than pretty. It was flawed by a little cleft in the end of it, and when she laughed the nose laughed too. The top wrinkled and the nostrils quivered convulsively.

She caught sight of Janey walking with the maid Abigail. Janey wore a scarlet velvet coat that had once belonged to Ellen herself, and her short red velvet arm was stretched up to meet Abigail's brown wool one. The coat was very brief, so that Janey's legs, like match sticks

only paler, gave an impression of almost frantic energy.

Soon the door opened and they were in the flat.

"You've been squashing your nose again," said Janey. "It's all square."

Janey had an extremely high voice and spoke in a manner which her mother sometimes found affected. She had a little triangular face with dark eyebrows over blue eyes, like her father. Her skin was white and fragile. It had none of the thick camellia texture of Ellen's, and was threaded by the network of her veins. At four years old she was very coquettish and had a sort of melting approach as though all her bones were wax. But she could be capricious too, sly, and even witty.

Ellen did not love Janey without reserve. She recalled a cleaner break between childhood and womanhood herself and was irritated by the extreme femininity of this baby girl. Yet Ellen tried to treat her daughter with respect. "Did you have a nice morning, darling?" she asked.

"Oh yes," said Janey, "but Billy was very rude." Janey pronounced it 'wude' and Ellen could not help correcting her.

"Rude, r-rude, not wude," she said, crouching down to be on a level with her child.

"I think wude is nicer," said Janey, lowering her eyes.

"Nobody likes affected children," said Ellen, helping Janey off with her coat.

"Daddy likes me," said Janey. "He likes me to say wude."

This was so true that Ellen had to laugh. Sandy looked fatuously upon his little girl.

Janey, seeing her success, gave a flirt to her whole body, like a bird after its bath, and ran off to Abigail in the kitchen. Ellen rose, holding the small, scarlet coat in her hand. 'I must have been treating her woman to woman again,' she thought, 'since she answered me that way.'

A feeling of idleness, a mainspring in her character, came over her and the exaltation of the morning drained away. It was as though movement itself generated energy in Ellen's body, and perhaps it did. Only by activity could the slow pumping of her heart be speeded up, and then her step would quicken, her eyes would shine, she would throw back her head and laugh. Because Ellen had energy when it was needed, both mental and physical. She had a quick mind and was perfectly coordinated in a muscular way. Yet when there was no demand on her, she relaxed. She would lie on the bed, sleep or read a magazine, sunk in the somnolent lethargy of a cat. At such times the whole rhythm of her blood was slow, for Ellen had a lazy heart's beat.

The austere Abigail disapproved. Ellen would let her come into the room as she was lying down, where another woman would have pretended occupation. Ellen, in fact, had very little shame, that stifling curse of many sensitive natures, and from this one might deduce that she was not sensitive. It was hard to tell. Lying on the bed with her hands relaxed, Ellen's eyes would narrow

and in their yellow depths a dream would struggle with repose.

"Are you unwell?" Abigail would ask sternly. Then by way of a reproach and to make herself more bitter, the servant would pick up the gloves, the coat, or even the dress which Ellen had let drop where she had taken it off.

"Why do you do that, Abigail? It's extra, not paid for at all," Ellen would ask in an idle voice.

"Because I don't like to see untidiness, Mrs. Hunter. It's a bad example for Janey."

"On the contrary, Abigail, it's a good example. My mother was too neat, and always fussing about it. That's why I'm so messy. And Janey will revolt in turn and be the opposite from me."

"I don't know where you get your ideas," said Abigail. "It just beats me."

But both Abigail and Ellen enjoyed these talks, otherwise Abigail would not have entered Ellen's room where, strictly speaking, she had nothing to do.

Abigail and Ellen lunched together at the table in the living room; the kitchen was too small to eat in. Janey was by then in bed and supposedly asleep for an hour. Sometimes Ellen, who was fond of wine, would buy a bottle and press Abigail to drink some. But Abigail never would. She was Irish and had seen father and husband disintegrate through drink. The servant was a good-looking, middle-aged woman, slim, with grey hair. Her only visible fault was a terribly shiny nose. Ellen longed

to tell her about it yet she never had. Abigail put vanity in the same category as wine. She was very religious and went to Mass each morning before coming to the Hunters.

Sometimes, to tease Abigail, Ellen, dressed to go out, would ask: "Abigail, do I look nice?"

"If you mean decent," Abigail would answer, "then I must tell you your dress is too tight behind."

"I don't mean decent. I mean nice," Ellen would insist. "Nice. Pretty, glamorous, attractive."

"Those words are no concern of a married woman, if you want my opinion."

"Yet you're forever telling Janey how pretty she is." Ellen would try and draw Abigail out.

"Janey is a little girl."

"And what about when she's sixteen?"

"Sure she'll have a right to look pretty then too, and be told so by all until she's married."

Ellen pounced. "Ah Abigail, how immoral! That's just a man trap you're setting with virgin bait. You want her to attract a man in the most disgusting way, like a pot of honey with bees and then, once he's caught, no more honey. It's glue instead. Why shouldn't a woman be desirable after her marriage? It's her duty."

"Words, sinful words! You're very fond of them, aren't you, Mrs. Hunter? And of twisting them around until the wickedest ones are in front."

By such conversation, trivial and absurd, their relationship flowered. For Ellen had it in her to like this

kind of talk ('servant talk,' her mother would have called it). She far preferred teasing Abigail with her narrow thoughts to conversing on intellectual subjects with her husband's friends or women of her own age and upbringing.

Today, curled up on her bed, Ellen felt the sensation of life slipping away from her; a tide running over her, over her eyes, over her brain, over her youth. It was not unpleasant and she was not unhappy. 'After all,' she thought, 'I have done very well so far. Sandy, Janey, a life many people would think perfect, and a future too. There are still so many things to long for in the world.' But she could not think of them at the moment and the tide kept on flowing, muffling the slow beat of Ellen's heart.



CHAPTER THREE Sandhurst Hunter came home at six, just as Ellen was bathing her child. He hovered at the bathroom door awhile, admiring the tender little body that he had helped to make. Janey was very pretty in her bath and stretched out her arms to her father.

"I have a balloon," she said, "but it's on the ceiling."

"That's fine," said Sandy.

"It isn't fine," contradicted Janey impatiently. "It's on the ceiling." Janey often found her father incredibly stupid, even if she did love him the best.

fect coordination she matched him in some summer sport, then it was worth while for Sandy.

Sandy had tried to educate Ellen, to lift her mind, as he considered it. And she loved to be taught. She would quickly learn and quickly forget. Just now they were reading the works of Chaucer together. Sandy was surprised at Ellen's natural delight. She had never read Chaucer and but for Sandy would have lived quite happily without doing so, yet he was humbled by her comprehension of the poet, which was unstained by intellectuality. Each day he would give her a number of verses to read in Middle English and they would repeat them aloud in the evening.

On the table in front of the sofa Sandy now saw the open book and smiled. Then beside it he observed the magazine, *True Story*. There it was again! Sandy's lips twitched with a sort of rueful exasperation. Ellen would read both with the same attention: *True Story* and Chaucer. She would find poetry in each.

Ellen came in followed by Janey, whose little bare feet, square and flat, pattered on the floor. "Should I get dressed now for that cocktail party?" asked Ellen.

"I suppose so," Sandy answered, lifting his child to his knee. "I'm not changing."

"I had string beans for supper," said Janey, and added proudly: "but I didn't eat them."

While Sandy and Janey conversed, Ellen went into the bedroom and sat down in front of the dresser. Although she sometimes went out without so much as

powdering her nose, she could make up perfectly if she wished. She had as many tubes, sticks, and pots on her dresser as an actress. Sandy, scrupulously tidy, was forever complaining. There was hardly room on its surface for his two silver-backed brushes, and it drove him wild that on occasion she used these as well.

Ellen studied her face calmly and, with a look of pleasure, began to work on it.

When she was finished, Ellen put on her new dress which smelled faintly of the salon, as though handled by correctly perfumed hands. Then she patted into place the waving locks of her hair which, although dark ash, was high-lighted with gold, making her look blonder than she was. Ellen wore her hair short, like a European boy or a musician. Brushed away from her face, it showed her smooth jaw and the tips of her ears. Now she was ready.

"Do you think I look all right, Sandy and Janey?"

"You look lovely," said Sandy.

Janey turned her face away. She was terribly jealous of her mother. Ellen's bosom, her right to wear scent, make-up, and high heels tormented the little girl of four who could see in front of her the endless years of childhood. "Finish the story," she begged her father.

"No," he said, "some other time. I must go out with your beautiful mother now."

Janey blinked with the shock of her jealousy and felt a familiar congestion at the back of her eyes and nose. Ellen, who understood quite well, looked down with a

faint demure smile, like a successful rival. Ellen never gave in to her child as some mothers do, letting the child feed on their maternal bodies, devour and spring from them. She wanted still to be herself, Ellen, good or bad, and for Janey to do the same.

A ring at the door announced Betty, the college girl who sat up in the flat when the Hunters went out. Betty was a plump little thing with short legs and long brown hair. Staggering under a load of books, she looked the least fit in all the world to read them.

Sandy teased her mildly and she ^{was} in love with him. That is, she had an adoration for him, a school-girl's crush which was perfectly obvious. Betty found her plumpness an unbearable obstacle to romance, and for Sandy's sake would have wished to give up eating candies. Yet every day she fell, not once but often. So she was humble and looked at him with remorseful brown eyes. She did not much like Ellen, although she had nothing against her.

"Hello, Betty," said Sandy. "Did you have a nice summer?"

"Oh, it was so-so, Mr. Hunter. Mother wouldn't let me take summer courses like I wanted to."

"She's right," said Sandy. "You'll get so learned that no one will dare marry you."

"Oh, but I wouldn't marry anyone who didn't share my interests," retorted Betty.

"Suppose he's just interested in your beauty and fascination?" teased Sandy.

Betty, to whom this idea connected with someone like Sandy was an ecstatic dream, put on a serious face. "Then I wouldn't have him," she said, but she blushed until the tears came to her eyes.

Janey started to wail and begged her parents not to leave her. From her cries one would have thought her a starveling abandoned brutally in a ditch.

Ellen stood aloof, holding her coat over her arm and shifting her weight from hip to hip. She wanted to be off. The flat seemed suddenly narrow, cramped, and almost sordid.

"We really should have another child," she said on the way down in the self-run elevator. "Janey has no one to rub up against."

"Could I stand two of them?" asked Sandy, but secretly he was happy at this indication of his wife's wishes. He was extremely fastidious, almost to the point of being fussy. His love for Ellen had sometimes dismayed, even disgusted him. The idea of children set it right. A child was like a cauterizing seal on the wounds sensuality made in his heart. He permitted himself to smile in a special way at Ellen.

Outside, the day had almost waned. The sky was still a pure blue, yet it no longer reached down between the buildings as it had that morning. The streets were drab, drained of color, of light, and of warmth. There was a west wind blowing. Its voice, even in the enormous city, sounded mournful, while upon its bosom now and then a sad leaf wandered.

Sandy and Ellen walked eastward, passing at once into the shabby part of their street where the dust grated underfoot.

"Sometimes I like this end of our block the best," said Ellen as they passed a little wooden shack, glass-fronted and belonging to the shoe-shine man. The owner was still inside it, polishing the shoes of a smooth-faced young Italian with a hard mouth. He was kneeling on the floor as to some prince. His legs, which appeared almost boneless, were thrust out at the feet so that he could touch his thighs to the ground between them. He was a Negro and now he turned and grinned at the Hunters over his shoulder. His customer stared insolently out and twisted his hard mouth with contempt. Perhaps the Italian was angry at Sandy's height, his well-cut suit, or his provocative woman. .

Sandy took Ellen's arm against the rough cobbles under the El. As he bent to her a wave of perfume enveloped him. He felt her light soft bosom resting, as it were, on his arm, and the turn of her hip brushed his thigh. She picked her way daintily in her high heels and laughed as she slipped on the uncertain stones.

"You're very glamorous tonight," he said.

Ellen gave him a sidelong smile. She was perfect at taking compliments and by her return glance seemed to place the flattery back again in another way. It was as though she said: 'It takes a *man* to say that to me.'

But Ellen no longer cared as much for Sandy's admiration as she once had; she knew too easily how to

call it out. In a way she preferred his disapproval. It was deeper, more passionate, somehow. It did her good and forced her to effort. "Who must I be nice to at the party?" she asked.

Sandy looked down at her with exasperated amusement. It was an old argument between them. "Your work is to help me in any way you can," he would say. "You have no other job, and I am struggling to give us a good life."

"I simply can't be a hypocrite, I guess," she would sigh with a sort of false candor. "Anyway, why don't you make me get a job?"

"I just told you, I'm your job," he would retort, although the very term, 'make me,' flattered him. Ellen, outwardly at least, accepted the 'obey' in marriage.

"But what if I'm not good at that part of it?" she sometimes countered. Or she would give in: "Next time if you tell me who, I'll do it just right."

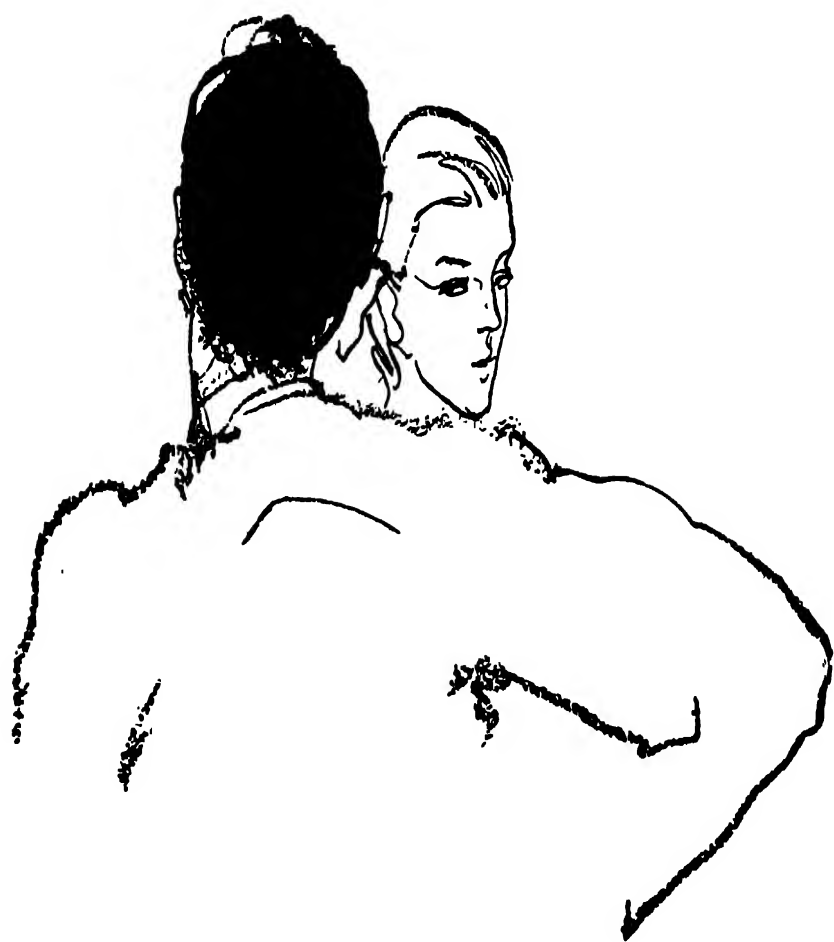
Now Sandy said: "Oh well, it's even worse if I brief you. It makes me feel dishonest and you know it, you devil. Anyway, this party should be more amusing for you than most."

"I wish you had faults," Ellen complained. "Or I wish I could find them, because they must exist."

"Well, you get annoyed at me sometimes."

"That's only to relieve my nerves," said Ellen, "or to practice in case you develop any."

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CHAPTER FOUR Ray Sullivan lived in a very small brick house on the East River. It was one of those charming, inconvenient places that fetch a high rent but must have a special tenant. Too small for a family, too antiquated for the ordinary housewife, they are perfect for the single young man in the fashion-art world. Ray's house hung over the water and trembled with the vibrations of a traffic artery which had been cut beneath. There was a vine-covered gate to be opened and a brass knocker on the door.

Ray's party was going full swing and the Hunters,

after taking off their coats, stood still a minute to orient themselves. They had an understanding that at cocktail parties they would not cling together, but would separate and go off each on his own. For Sandy this was an ordeal until the first drink was down. He was diffident and his fastidious nature shrank from a too brusque contact with people he did not know and might not like. Once over this initial stage, however, he was an asset to any gathering. Then his blue eyes would begin to twinkle and, growing animated, he gestured with his fine, strong, long-fingered hands. He was a better mixer in the end than Ellen, who would drift off in the most debonair fashion and make no attempt to talk to anyone.

But Ellen was fond of parties and not a bit dismayed even at first or among total strangers. It amused her to walk slowly around, glass in hand, and observe the other people as though she were at a zoo. Yet in this zoo it was the humans who were caged; the solitary animal alone was free—the stalking, feline Ellen with her yellow eyes. Sometimes she would raise the glass to taste on her lips the bourbon, bitter and fiery, which she sipped neat. Sometimes, too, she would allow herself to be drawn into conversation, and she was certainly not above flirting.

Tonight Ellen stayed with her host a moment as he got her a drink and then melted into the throng of his guests. At first she saw no one whom she knew, but presently she became aware of a man standing centered

in a group and looking directly at her. His powerful look, thrown brutally upon her person, arrested Ellen and she recalled having felt the same impact once before. It was her follower of the morning, the man who had held the rose in his mouth. Ellen smiled to see that although he wanted to come up to her, to try to make her acquaintance, he was helpless in the grip of those around him. They were hedging him in, clamoring for his attention. Ellen noticed maliciously that Gerry was among them. The man then must be important in some way.

Geraldine was dressed in black silk. Her décolleté exposed her flat, bony upper chest beneath which came a surprising jut of bosom. She was leaning forward with the anxious and sincere expression of a woman who is trying to please an artist.

Ellen stood quite still, her weight as usual on one foot. She was curious. Then she saw the man take Geraldine's arm abruptly and ask something in a low voice. Geraldine could not keep the dismay from her face, but Ellen saw her nod and then lead him out of the group of his admirers.

"Ellen, do you know Zanic?" Her impeccable social manners robbed the introduction of all inflection, even reproach. "Mrs. Hunter, Mr. Zanic." And with a little laugh: "The *sculptor* Zanic."

Then Geraldine, who could not bear to wait and be a third, went back to the group who were still ani-

matedly talking, trying to ignore that their center had dropped away.

Zanic was a man of middle age and uncommon appearance. His face was beginning to show the ravages of a peculiar sickness, a disease which enlarges the extremities of the body and distorts the features. This disease transforms the man or woman attained. After a few years the face loses its identity, as does the body, and a new creature emerges. Zanic was only part way along; there were still traces of the earlier man, and these mingled disconcertingly, almost tenderly, with those of the future monster. His hair was black and fell boyishly over his forehead, but the forehead itself was swollen and marked with heavy lines. The eyebrows jutted like an ape's. The nose was bulbous, the mouth thick, protruding, and almost comically sensual. And that sensual mouth was pale. Indeed, the whole face was livid, only the eyes were full of a dark, warm brown iris. Then too, the effort of moving this great muzzle seemed to have displaced the cords and sinews of the skin. It was like India rubber, like those faces children buy and which they can contort with their fingers.

Aside from this, the man was of a strong build and perfectly well-dressed, unassumingly and without artistic touches. In the street, where there are many ugly people, he would go unnoticed. Here, in this company of thin fashionable women and over-refined young man, he stood out, and not unpleasantly. In fact, he was re-

freshing. Besides, Zanic was à la mode. He was having his day. Five years hence it would be over, five years ago it had not begun. He was clever enough to know this, and shrewd too. He had made a lot of money and would make more. It was as though this gift of his were quite apart from the rest of him, a money-making quirk in his brain. It spoilt something, perhaps—his talent, his integrity, or his honor—but it was useful and he made the most of it.

Now Zanic took Ellen's hand which she had given him at Geraldine's introduction and pressed it to his mouth. At that moist contact Ellen felt a wave of what she took to be repulsion. Released, she could not help rubbing her hand against her hip to take away the traces of his kiss.

"This is an answer to my wish," he said. "I wished for us to meet again." His voice, heavily accented, was rather high. It was so soft one had to strain to hear, as though he had once made so loud a cry his vocal cords had been impaired. And who could tell: men must shout in crowds for leaders; shriek in torture chambers; sing in the advancing and retreating armies; abuse, laugh, groan, and plead. In any case, all this was behind him now, if any of it had ever been. He was Zanic the sculptor who was a success.

"We didn't meet this morning," said Ellen, "but I saw a table of your work."

"Have you so many followers that you can't remember

me?" he asked, ignoring the latter part of her sentence.

"Why aren't you wearing your rose as a sign?" asked Ellen, flicking her eyes wickedly up to his face.

"It has done its work," he retorted, "since it made you know me again."

"Did it have thorns?" Ellen rather enjoyed playing with this monster whose soft voice was so full of admiration.

"Yes," he said, "but I was glad to feel them for your sake. They soothed me."

"You should have offered that beautiful rose to me," she said.

"No, no," he cried softly, shaking his head. "It's just the other way around. It's you who must offer me one."

At the sexual meaning of this remark—made plain by his eyes, his voice, the set of his whole body—Ellen turned away at once. She moved off as though she had never been beside him, and did not bother to look confused.

Zanic gazed after her as she threaded her way through the crowd. The high-necked dress she wore lent her a quality that was equivocal, almost deceitful. It emphasized the voluptuous and disdainful sway of her hips and, above, the little head emerged almost childishly with its tendril-covered nape. Zanic, even while watching, was swallowed up again by the throng of his admirers.

Ellen talked to people here and there, but not for

long. She was growing oppressed by the atmosphere of the room. Its air, heavy with the breath of forced conversations, constricted her lungs. The ice had melted in her drink and her new dress felt alien on her body. Noticing an open French window, she stepped out onto the balcony beyond.

It had grown dark, yet the mist that blew into her face was luminous. It moved upward from the river, urged by the west wind, and then dissolved into pearly shreds. It was warm in Ellen's nostrils, noisome, unhealthy, and it seemed to waft down into the channels of her breast. She laid her hand on the railing, and the pearly mist, the broad tormented river, the boats passing with their lights, their mournful signals, filled her with a sense of desolation. It was as though her heart were being gently wrung.

No one perhaps is secure from such moments, since they appear to be a law of nature herself. They come with the changing seasons, the full or the waning moons, the east wind or the west. They speak pitilessly to the most trivial soul. The hearty extrovert no doubt will suffer them at times. Ellen, standing on the balcony, felt the narrowness of all her life. Or, rather, she became aware of other lives, and of the fact that of all the many paths in the world, there was only one on which she trod. This feeling, she realized, had been unknown to her before, or at any rate it had been less clear. She had been young and had believed the choice was still ahead

of her. Any road might be hers, and so, she thought, it might be every road. Now, insidiously, the truth struck her with a sadness which was kin to envy.

Ellen leaned over the rail and tried to make out the ships on the river. Which of them were going far and which were local craft? She could not tell, yet among those moving shapes some were surely outward bound. They would cross oceans and touch foreign continents. Like enormous fish they would nose among the islands of the sea.

‘Perhaps I should have been a man,’ thought Ellen. ‘Then I would be a sailor.’ But Sandy was a man and his life was as bound as hers, more so. ‘And anyway I wouldn’t like it. I would like—I would like—’ What would she like? What had she anticipated as a young girl, for instance? Ellen, casting back her thoughts to those days, realized that she had spent almost all her time thinking about boys: boys who took her out, who whispered in her ear, who kissed her. Tall boys, short boys, boys handsome or ugly, and that final, misty, future boy who would come along and be a man and who, as it turned out, was Sandy.

‘How I wasted my time,’ she thought. ‘I should have spent it otherwise. Then the whole wide world was my domain and I ignored it.’ Yet even as she thought this, there came back to her the sweet unutterable feeling of a first caress, of those brief but palpitating emotions she had felt so easily. How her heart had leapt at the

ringing of a telephone! How dejected and exalted she had been by turns! And there was that silence just before anything happened (usually in a car) when one looked sideways and one's eyelashes felt a yard long.

Ellen leaned forward on the balcony and the cold metal of the railing, like an icy sword, thrust across her breast and barred her way.



CHAPTER FIVE Now that they had moved to town, Sandy could stay in bed longer. He would lie with his arms as a pillow and look out upon the autumn sky. His stare had at such times a helpless vagueness; the pupil, enlarged by sleep, contracted slowly, as though open windows were being closed. His face, too, was different, smoothed out and very clear and pale. Soon he must rise and face the daily struggle once again.

Then Sandy's boyish, tousled look would go. The muscles of his jaw would tighten, his eyes become transformed by glasses, his glance turn scholarly and a little dry.

Ellen made a fuss over her husband in the morning, not a constructive one—she did not cook his breakfast—but a loving one. What is more, she woke up beautifully, her hair curly from the dew of slumber. They were like angels for those few moments: sinless as the morning, healthy and pale as though the sun of the universe had not yet scorched them. They had breakfast in bed, or rather Ellen had breakfast in bed, and Sandy, two-thirds dressed, sat on the edge of it. He wore a clean shirt every day, and from the fresh open collar his neck rose smoothly shaven, but with a tuft of hair at the base. The Adam's apple moved on his throat as he swallowed his coffee and eggs. Ellen was always sad to see him put on his tie, his waistcoat, and jacket. Then his body, the traces of his virility and youth, disappeared that day for good, and he became once more a cog in the machinery of civilization. But Sandy was a cog with a brain, and that made it worse; a sensitive, straining cog which could hope and suffer boredom. Ellen remained Ellen, lying in bed with shining eyes and bare arms.

On the morning after Ray's party Sandy was up at his usual time and was wandering about the room in his white smallclothes. He was trying to remember where he had left his glasses, a daily occupation. Feeling Ellen looking at him, he turned and smiled helplessly. How pretty she looked with her hair made misty by his myopia!

"I love you when you're not all dressed," she said. "It makes you especially at my mercy."

"I'm always that," he said, and sitting near her kissed her cheeks and her rough hair.

Abigail knocked at the door and Sandy sprang up as though he were doing something wrong. She came in, absolved by her early Mass around the corner, but disapproving slightly of Sandy's long bare hairy legs. At her heels was Janey in a nightgown. Janey went at once, not to greet her parents, but to stroke and fondle Ellen's new dress which lay inside-out on a chair. The dress was a dark amber satin, pure silk, and Janey hid her face against it and closed her eyes.

"Come here, you sensuous little creature," said Sandy.

But he was wrong. Janey was not touching the dress for a sensuous thrill. Ellen might have, at the age of four. Janey was different. She did it for cerebral reasons. There was an almost hopeless longing in her breast that one day this dress would be hers, that she would do the things ladies did in such clothes: sip from little glasses, smell perfume, be admired. By stroking the dress, Janey was propitiating it, begging it with silent prayers, and flirting with it, too. She was really more like her father, but her baby-girl fragility deceived Sandy in this matter. Finally she came over to stand by her mother's bed.

"Tell me about the party, Mummie."

Ellen stirred her coffee. "Well, there was an old woman shaped like a hoop and she wore a pointed hat with diamonds on it, or rather, everyone *thought* they were diamonds."

"You're not supposed to fill their heads with unreali-

ties," said Sandy. "She'll believe you and then be disappointed all her life."

"Why aren't witches real?" argued Ellen. "They're just as real as *law*."

"I'd like to know that old woman," said Janey.

"You didn't seem to be having much fun at the party, witch or no witch," said Sandy. "You were out mooning on the balcony. That friend of yours with all the make-up came and said she thought you were ill."

"Oh, Gerry!" Ellen shrugged as though saying: 'What else could one expect of her?'

Sandy struggled with the cowlicks of his hair before the mirror. "Anyway," he said, "she introduced me to a fascinating man, a sculptor or something, he—"

But just then the telephone rang on its table by the bed. Ellen picked up the receiver. "Hello," she said. "Hello!"

There was a silence, or rather there was no voice, since the wires are never still, but hum and click across the lands of the earth.

"Hello!" said Ellen, frowning and bending towards the telephone. She fancied then that her ear was troubled by soft and intermittent sighs. They disturbed the electric currents with warm gusts of human breath. The wires' hum, broken by these sighs, brought distance into the bedroom and, by that faraway sound that was almost a silence, isolated Ellen and cut her off from husband and child. Her face was turned upon the instrument abstractedly. The shrug of a shoulder had exposed her

breast. One of her hands played idly with the telephone cord and thus Ellen noticed the pulse in her own right wrist which stood out silhouetted. It jumped uneasily, like a separate life inside her own, that lazy, too slow pulse of Ellen's which had quickened. Ellen pulled her hand away as though the wire had shocked it.

Janey meanwhile had again gone to the chair which held the dress. She was now talking to it for the benefit of her father: "One day I'll wear you and go to a party and everyone will say, 'There goes Janey, shaped like a hoop.'"

"Are you planning to be a witch?" asked Sandy, coming over and lifting her in his arms. "I thought you were planning to be a beautiful girl."

Janey gave him a sly look out of her very bones which twisted inside their waxy flesh. "A hoop in front," she said.

Sandy felt faint with love and pity. "I must run!" he exclaimed. "I must be at the office early today." He put her down almost brusquely and left the room with an air of stuffing things into his pocket. Then as an afterthought he returned and kissed Ellen's cheek as she bent over, still absorbed in the telephone.

Janey followed her father to the elevator. As she ran she tripped over her long nightgown which she tried to hold up with one hand so as to be able to suck the thumb on the other.

Ellen remained alone. She replaced the receiver gently, almost furtively, and lay back. The morning sun

did not shine here on the north side of the street and the bedside lamp was on. Ellen put her arm across her eyes to shut out its glare. Yet the light pierced her flesh, shone through her blood so that her arm was rimmed in scarlet. From the open window warm air entered the room and played with the curtains. The freshness of the day before had gone. The weather was softening, like a voice influenced by tenderness or by regret. 'Never again,' it seemed to say, 'will I be as warm as this, for who knows if another spring will really come?'

Then, without bidding, a spoken question came into Ellen's mind as though another had asked it: Who had given that man her number? There were many Hunters in the book. Had he tried them all? Had his sighs tried a dozen houses before reaching hers?

'How stupid I am,' she thought. 'I'm acting as if I really knew who called this morning.'

Suddenly she had had enough of bed. She leapt out of it and began at once to dress. In her chemise she ran to the bathroom—a trick detested by Abigail, who thought she should wear a wrapper.

"What if the delivery boy or the milkman should see you, Mrs. Hunter?"

"Oh, Abigail, you would be there as chaperone, and anyway, a bathing suit is less."

Yet who knows if secretly Abigail did not enjoy watching Ellen with her slender legs, her rather full hips? She was like one of those woodland animals, ante-

lope or hart, who can break their fine limbs on unaccustomed ground.

Janey, now dressed, came in to watch her mother. She was fascinated by the dark gold curls on Ellen's body and by her breasts.

"Will I have that too?"

"I hope so," said Ellen. "If you're good."

"What if I'm bad?"

"Well, perhaps you'll have everything anyway."

"And what if I don't want it at all?"

Ellen tousled her daughter's hair. "Oh, it's nice at times," she said.

Janey hated to have her hair messed. It was straight and smooth, cut in bangs and at the middle of her ears. "Now Abigail must brush me," she cried reproachfully.

"It looks better like that," said Ellen, and began to wash her face, to soap her close-grained ivory skin and rinse it in cold water.



CHAPTER SIX Ellen enjoyed going to the market and went almost every day, leaving other duties to Abigail. She was very particular about her markets, too. She could not bear, for instance, those dreary yet overcrowded halls where one wanders like a soul in purgatory through stacks and stacks of goods. In such places, she found, food was parceled, washed, dried, treated, even pre-digested. There was nothing left but to shove it in the mouth and one might just as well main-line it. In such places, too, women must push baskets in front of them on wheels and help themselves, and

Ellen's nature revolted against this lack of the personal. Without realizing it—for she never talked or thought about politics—Ellen was a backer of small business.

Today, after taking up her shopping bag, Ellen turned her steps eastwards. A mist, tinged with lavender, had replaced the clarity of early morning, but the sun still pierced it.

"Want a shine, Mrs. Hunter?" The Negro was standing idly at the door of his booth, inhaling the warm and humid breeze.

Ellen consented. She sat up on the chair and extended her leg. It made her feel like a queen with a loyal subject. There was love in the way the shoe-shine man set her foot on the metal print. He seldom got a woman's foot in his hands and he admired Ellen's little brown shoes which laced up the front and had, unexpectedly, high heels. They represented for him all that was coquettish and contradictory in a woman. They were like a mockery of a man's shoe, and a mockery that failed because they were only ridiculous. The man could stay victorious after all, and maybe even this was on purpose.

"How are you, Jack?"

"Oh, I'm all right. God's in heaven, so how can I complain?" Jack was fond of talking about God and had once told Ellen that he preached Sundays.

"I don't see why that makes everything so perfect," said Ellen.

"You don't see and I don't see, but God sees and that's

what's important. Say, Mrs. Hunter, you've got a nick there. How'd you do that?"

"I guess someone must have stepped on me."

Jack shook his head. He was sitting in his usual position with his knees twisted outward. The muscles of his thighs bulged through his cotton pants as he moved up and down, polishing and shining. Finally he put a drop of oil on the toe which made the shoe look like patent leather.

"Oh Jack, you know I don't like that shining oil!"

"Sure Mrs. Hunter, I know. You're a real quiet lady."

"But you put it on all the same," said Ellen, smiling and putting out her other foot.

"You have that same shine in your eyes, Mrs. Hunter. You've got to make the most of those shiny years."

"Would God like that?" asked Ellen maliciously.

"God loves all the young animals," said Jack. He handed Ellen down from the chair and watched her walk away with her sinuous demure step. She was soon lost in the misty streets.

Ellen's heart felt light and cleansed, the way a woman's must after a compliment. She looked around her and was pleased by everything. 'Perhaps it's true,' she thought. 'Perhaps God is in his heaven, not as Jack thinks, but as a reflection of all the beautiful and good thoughts on earth. All the beautiful gestures, too, everything, the smallest movement of the smallest beast, a beautiful one that is. The ugly ones would be rejected by the God mirror.'

Yet, despite these thoughts—of which she was rather proud—Ellen still pictured God as an immense man in the sky and she much preferred him this way, too, although she would not admit it.

She was walking towards Second Avenue by now and the quality of the houses was very uneven. Some were enormous warrens with doormen and elevators, while some were shabby old brownstones. Others were frankly tenements, and through alleyways of demolished lots one could see the laundry hanging from their back windows.

Such washes could only be an exchange, thought Ellen, not a cleansing; the sweat of the toiling man exchanged for the black sweat of the city. Yet she had always been drawn to such places. Their life, bitter and robust, attracted her. She watched with interest the men in singlets with their freckled arms and she watched the women, too, sullenly ripe at sixteen, ponderous at thirty. 'What if I had been born to that?' she wondered. 'Would I be any happier?'

She pictured a room, teeming and dark, where she would live and love and fight and use up all her strength and all her heart each day.

There it was again, thought Ellen with a sigh, the longing to know more than one life, and the feeling as well, a new one, that her own was slipping, slipping forever out of youth. 'Although Jack did call me a young animal,' she recalled.

On Second Avenue she walked uptown a couple of

blocks and then reached her destination, big, red-painted doors giving into a group of markets housed together in a vaulted cement hall. It had stalls after the European fashion, booths belonging to separate owners, each of whom cried his wares loudly. The light filtered down from a glass roof. At the far end was a tap where people washed their vegetables. The tap had somehow the air of a fountain, like a plain girl who thinks herself a beauty. Almost constantly turned on, the sound of its water threaded through the market noises. There were all sorts of smells in the air: autumn fruits and herbs, garlic, onions and other roots, with a strong fish odor welding it all together.

Ellen was known here and a favorite, greeted with soft words in broken English. Some of these words were impertinent, indecent even, but they were thrown out with such grace and so directly that she could not mind.

Unfolding the big canvas shopping bag, Ellen moved from stall to stall, letting herself be cajoled and tasting here and there a berry or some other tidbit held out by unhygienic hands. She bit into a Seckel pear, small and green, picked, she fancied, in the time of the new moon, and cold in her mouth, dewy, harsh and sweet at once. The man who offered it had his family helping him in the market; even an old woman whom Ellen took to be the grandmother had been set to work shelling peas. Shelled, they could be sold at a higher price.

Ellen had seen this family in the market for three years, but she was wrong in her ideas about them. She

believed them to be Italian, and placed the harshness of their speech as some mountain dialect. Actually there was only one Latin among them. Ellen thought the old woman was mother of the owner and grandmother of the boy who was sometimes there after school. But, in fact, the woman was the mother of both, and was not really old at all.

"How is your little boy?" she now asked the owner by way of thanks for the Seckel pear.

"Oh, he's at school, doing fine," he said. He had really come to believe, as did Ellen, that the child was his son instead of his brother, for he could not imagine his mother conceiving and bearing a child so little a time ago. He did not even like to think of it, and he was glad his father was dead. He himself had a pregnant wife—the Italian among them—one of those beauties with madonna faces, the kind of woman who is later easily disgraced by fat. Ellen had once asked this woman for a recipe which was given willingly but with a sad pitying look. The woman was feeling sorry for Sandy whom she imagined to be a puny, starving man.

Ellen now bought some peas and moved away to the fish stall. The big clock set up in the wall told noontime so she made haste. On the way out, however, she was struck by something seen from the tail of her eye, or rather something re-seen. Because, on the instant, she knew that the same thing had caught at her attention before, when she had first come into the market. Ellen was on the street before these thoughts had fairly formu-

lated in her brain. She paused on the Avenue and, looking vaguely around her, tried to concentrate.

'And why should it affect me in any way,' she reasoned, 'if Zanic's work is in the market place? Besides, I'm probably wrong. His stuff is so ordinary. It might be found anywhere, turned out by machine.'

Yet Ellen continued to stand there and examine the street as though expecting it to answer her. In fact Second Avenue did seem to be entering her problem. It was a wide thoroughfare that had a naked look due to the destruction of the Elevated some years before. Never having recovered from this blow, it now staggered unevenly and formlessly off into the distance on either side. The light of day fell harshly upon the dirty pavement, leaving it grey. But this leaden color gave its crowds a theatrical appearance. They had the air, febrile, excited, uneasy, of creatures before a thunder storm.

Ellen walked back on her steps, trailing the big shopping bag in her hand. On the right of the market, just as one entered, a booth for dry goods was run by a small, trembling woman. She was there now, behind her stacks of dishcloths and towels, shaken constantly by an ague which jarred her about like a puppet. One side of her slanting, wooden booth had been cleared to make way for a series of china figurines.

"What are these?" asked Ellen, pointing.

The woman smiled, or perhaps it was only a tremulous grimace. "They're very pretty, aren't they, dear?" The words were fairly twitched out of her neck.

Ellen put out her hand and felt the smooth baked clay. Their forms were cold to the touch and, even without sight, false to nature and to art. "Do you know who makes these?" she asked.

The woman cast an anxious look around her. "It's Mr. Taras, of the vegetable stand, who asked me to display them. They had no space and it's more suitable here." And she added in a whisper: "They're related."

Ellen saw the owner of the vegetable stand coming over; the same from whom she had bought the peas. He grinned proudly.

"They were made by hand by a real artist," he said, and lifted up a little shepherdess, half naked and with long yellow hair. "Beautiful!" he exclaimed, caressing the object. "You know," he went on, turning to Ellen and using the figurine for emphasis, "the man who makes these makes plenty of money. Society ladies ask him out all the time." He looked again at the china figure in his hand and murmured dreamily: "He has girls come up to his studio and they look just like this."

Fancying disagreement in Ellen's expression, he added: "Of course he changes them a little. You've got to do that for class. Makes their hair longer, things like that." His face with its rather drooping mustache was full of awe.

"How much do you get for them?" asked Ellen.

"Oh, they're cheap," Taras said earnestly. "Three dollars and made by hand. Hand work." He looked once

more into Ellen's face. "It's true," he cried as though stung. "You got a bargain!"

But Ellen, waving her hand a little, walked out again.

Funny, she thought, how once someone came into your life he cropped up all the time and everywhere. Before, she had never heard of Zanic. Now she could hardly conceive how she had missed doing so.

'After all,' she reflected, 'that's what makes a reputation. Even though his things remain awful, I don't think of them in the same way as I did at first.'

It was true. In the salon of the Fifth Avenue store, promoted by Gerry, they had seemed odious—a joke played on a society of foolish women. The fact that they were sold in the market—a market which Ellen respected—threw another light upon them.

Ellen was now strolling homewards, shifting her market bag from one hand to another as it became heavy and cut into her palm. Her thoughts, concerned with Zanic's craft, kept on for a little while in this clear, conscious manner, almost as though they could be spoken aloud. But other thoughts, or rather, other impulses, travailed below these civilized expressions. They had no words, yet they had the force to spread into her system an animal unease that made her pace quicken.





CHAPTER SEVEN Joe Taras, the man who owned the vegetable stand, was a Yugoslav. He lived with his family on the same block as the Hunters, the meager end of it, that is, and there were three of them besides himself, all living together and working in the market. There was his pregnant wife, Maria, his small brother, Silver, and his mother, Helen. Maria was a Latin and had been picked up as the family passed through Italy on their way to the States.

Joe Taras was a capable man, self-reliant and sly in a simple way. He was handsome, too, although the

regularity of his features was broken by his thick, black mustache. His eyes were large, liquid, proud, and mournful. His hair had receded from his brow, exposing thoughtful temples. He had virility in his easy chest, his strong round arms, and he was very much the head of his family.

Joe was fond of his brother-in-law Zanic.

The Taras flat turned the corner of Seventy-fifth and Third Avenue and was eye to eye with the El. The train, in fact, seemed to enter the room every few minutes, filled with men and women who barely noticed, barely looked, like weary sightseers exhausted with their tour. There were three rooms in the flat, and, along with the Taras family, there was one paying guest, Anna of the dry-goods stall, who did not like to live alone. They needed her, too, what with Maria pregnant.

Alone in the kitchen the mother, Helen, was now preparing the evening meal—not the ordinary one tonight, for Zanic was coming with his wife, Marte. Helen's two sons of such diverse ages had not yet come in, and her daughter-in-law, Maria, was resting. Maria was delicate, had lost a child already and wanted terribly to be a mother. Helen herself had borne five children in her time, the first of whom was Marte. Tonight, moving around the kitchen, she thought of her native land that she would never see again. Perhaps it was because Zanic and Marte were expected and they took her further back in time than anyone around her now. She recalled the first time she had seen Zanic—Zizi, as they

called him—a wild little boy with a black lock falling in his eyes and a kid laid over his shoulder. He had come down from the mountains to Setinje to stay with his aunt, and the aunt had been a next door neighbor of Helen Taras.

Helen—that handsome Helen of long ago—had laughed at the young goatherd. She had teased Zizi with his black hair and amorous eyes, his wild ways from the barren mountains. Zizi's aunt had tethered the kid in back of her hut and the Taras children played with it until it grew up. Zizi on his part had stared at these town children, and even from the first he had made advances to Marte. He had spent the winter in Setinje and had gone to the same school as Marte, carrying her books and even lifting her over the mud. Helen had grown fond of him and sorry when he went away in the spring.

"I'll come back and marry Marte, never fear," he boasted, looking Helen in the eyes.

Helen's husband had asked, smiling: "How will you get money to buy Marte from me?"

"My father has gold beneath the stones of our fire," said Zizi. "He will give it to me when I want a wife."

Actually, Zizi's father, a widower, died, but the gold was there, and Zizi married Marte and went off with her to make his fortune. Marte did not see her mother again until they were reunited in America many years later.

As Helen was putting a plate into the oven, her

youngest son Silver ran into the room. Silver was a beautiful boy of ten with his mother's stern profile, her bold cheek and hooded eye. But he had inherited from his father who had died before his birth a sweet, mocking expression.

Silver had been a great surprise to Helen. She was almost fifty and her husband a dying man. They were leading the harassed, dreadful life of those who are escaping from one country into another and had crossed the mountains on foot to the Italian border. Big with Silver, Helen had become an old woman overnight. All the teeth in her head had fallen out at once. She had actually heard them snap, a dry sound without the living note of pain. Her hair, once so lustrous, had grown sparse and grey and she was miserably ashamed to be pregnant, 'an old crone who has lain down in the gutter,' she would say to herself in despair.

They had called the baby Silver because of a program on the radio which was broadcast from the land of their dreams. Helen knew now that Silver was only the name of a horse, but at the time the Taras family had thought it to be a national hero, a cowboy idol of the western desert.

Silver now demanded: "Grandmother, let me taste." He called her Grandmother because her eldest son insisted, and the old woman bowed before the master of the house. She gave him a spoonful of sauce and tried at the same time to caress his black hair. He ducked his head impatiently.

"Will Anna eat with us when my uncle comes?" he asked.

Helen made no reply. There were difficulties of language in any case, since Silver knew nothing but English and had even forgotten his early Italian. He thought his mother a fool not to learn English. But it was a question of will, and Helen was done with it all. She had been broken, she thought, for the last time, and to start another life was impossible. She would serve her family until the end, but she would not tire her brain to master a new speech. She would live in this enormous city like a stranger and ask nothing and die without a groan.

"Oh, I forgot you're just a dummy," said Silver, rudely. He often insulted her when they were alone together, although he was wary of his brother Joe. He ran out of the kitchen again and went in search of his brother, but he found only Maria sitting near a window with her chin on her hand. The window overlooked Seventy-fifth Street, dark and cheerless at this hour, but Maria did not care. She was absorbed by the life inside her. The pure oval of her face was uncontracted by the surrounding world. Silver looked at her for a few moments.

"Uncle Zizi will soon be here," he said.

Maria glanced at him for a moment, and then once again put her chin on the back of her hand. She was intrigued by the thought that each position she took was at once adopted by the baby in her womb. Thus she fancied him now sitting on the inside ledge of her ribs,

with his infant chin in his infant hand. Perhaps he was even wondering what she 'was like, this unknown mother of his, just as she was wondering on her part how he would turn out. Because she only knew one thing about her baby so far: that it would be a boy. 'The other was a girl, so it did not matter,' she thought, 'but this time I will keep him.'

Joe was out bowling. He had been a champion as a youth in Setinje, where the game was played outside each evening by the men and boys. It was not quite the same here, of course, and he was older, but he held his own. He got back home just before Zanic arrived, with the sweat of bowling still moistening his mustache.

Anna of the dry-goods stand was laying the table in the kitchen when the bell rang. She was beside herself with nervous anticipation and this fact accentuated her ague. Anna paid quite well for her bed and board. Indeed, she would have given her entire earnings to escape the lonely void her mother's death had cloven in her life and to escape her mother's ghost.

Zanic's wife Marte went at once to help Helen, her mother, and spoke to her with love and respect. Marte and Zanic were the only ones who ever spoke much to the old woman, for they themselves talked a Balkan dialect all the time at home. Also they remembered Helen as young, only twelve years older than Zanic, come to think about it.

Marte leaned over the stove. She was a plump woman, swarthy and slightly greasy of skin, not bad

looking, really, yet with none of her mother's distinction. Helen's woman-fat had disappeared with age. Marte's never would. Nor was there in Marte's brain any of Helen's austerity.

"Can I help you, Mother?" she asked.

"You will hurt your fine dress," replied Helen in a bitter voice.

Marte had a way when troubled of lifting up her eyebrows in the middle. She now did this and said: "Mother, I tell you to come and live with us."

"My place is here," said Helen. "I'm too old to get used to luxury." She emphasized the last word to make it sound unpleasant, but to herself she added tenderly: 'Here, with my son Silver.'

"Why are you so hard, Mother? Why shouldn't we live well if Zizi makes money? I went through bad times, why not good ones too?"

The old woman gave a sarcastic smile which was distorted by the unyielding line of her false teeth. The truth was that Helen did not at all know why she behaved thus to Marte, her first born. Perhaps it was that she wanted Marte, child of youth, only child of love, to stay with her now, to sink with her into old age, to murmur against her ear the small, everyday language of their beginnings. But Marte could not or would not let go of the fourteen years dividing them.

"You are making a fool of yourself, setting up for a duchess," cried Helen now, angry for being in the wrong. Marte did not at all look like a duchess, with

her face red from the stove and the strings of her corsets creaking audibly.

Meanwhile, Zanic and Joe were talking. They were sitting at the table, drinking white wine. They got on very well, the two of them, and their mutual accord was strengthened by mutual feelings of superiority to one another. Zanic would not for anything have brought Joe into the society he was now frequenting. On the other hand, he himself did not count this society permanent or important, and besides he needed Joe for just that balance without which he would be lost.

"What you should have is a good little business," Joe was saying. "Something you can count on."

"I've got my eye on a small factory in Jersey," Zanic replied, lowering his voice as men must when they scheme, "a flowerpot factory. In a little while I figure I can buy in. I might even have a line in ceramics."

"Don't wait too long, Zi," urged Joe, as though he were the elder and richer, giving advice. "That art stuff is risky." Personally he was torn between respect for his brother-in-law's work and the feeling that it wasn't work at all.

"People are crazy about what I do," said Zanic. "I got an offer from another museum today." Zanic could not help boasting. It was a natural trait in his character and had served him well. When one met him, he told about his triumphs and about the money he was making in the most simple way.

"What a lucky man," said Joe, winking at Marte, who

had come to sit gravely beside him. "I guess he sees more beautiful girls than anyone in New York City."

"Are they in the altogether?" asked Anna, who had heard the word somewhere. She was hovering near the table, trying in vain to do something useful. After her question she blushed deeply. Her neck jerked convulsively, and she plucked at the collar of her dress.

"Models aren't interesting," said Zanic, and it was almost as though he were complimenting Anna. But it was only the peculiar timbre of his voice, soft and tender as though broken in his throat, contrasting with his looks and making trivial words sound special. "Models are types," he continued. "They are already used up by the ideas of artists and photographers. Even if they are new to the work, the *idea*, the desire to be a model, deflowers them."

Joe understood nothing in this speech save that it was negative. "Well," he argued, "you must meet many beautiful girls at those parties they write about in the papers."

Zanic did not answer, but gave a movement of his head which might have been a nod. He seemed suddenly to reflect and looked down absently at his hand curved around his glass of wine. At length he shrugged, and turning to Maria said, to tease her: "Joe must see many pretty girls at the market too."

"That would be Mrs. Hunter," said Maria seriously, for she had no sense of humor.

"Maria's always talking about Mrs. Hunter," said Joe

with a tolerance that was forced. He could not quite ignore that his wife spoke in jealousy and he was guilty already. Later, not this year or the next, but surely some time, he would give her cause. Now he affirmed his denial, storing up virtue against that day. "I don't think *she's* so much. Washed out, if you ask me."

Anna clasped her hands. "I think Mrs. Hunter's beautiful," she cried.

There was a silence, broken almost at once by the El which, as it were, traversed the room in which they sat. One by one its cars swung across the kitchen horizon. Each car moved slower as the train prepared for the approaching station; rectangular boxes, lit and peopled, jarring the sutures of the rails.

If anyone noticed Ellen sitting solitary in the last car, no one mentioned it. But there was time to see her quite plainly before she was drawn out of sight.

Zanic pushed his chair back from the table and, taking something out of his pocket, began whittling at it with a penknife.

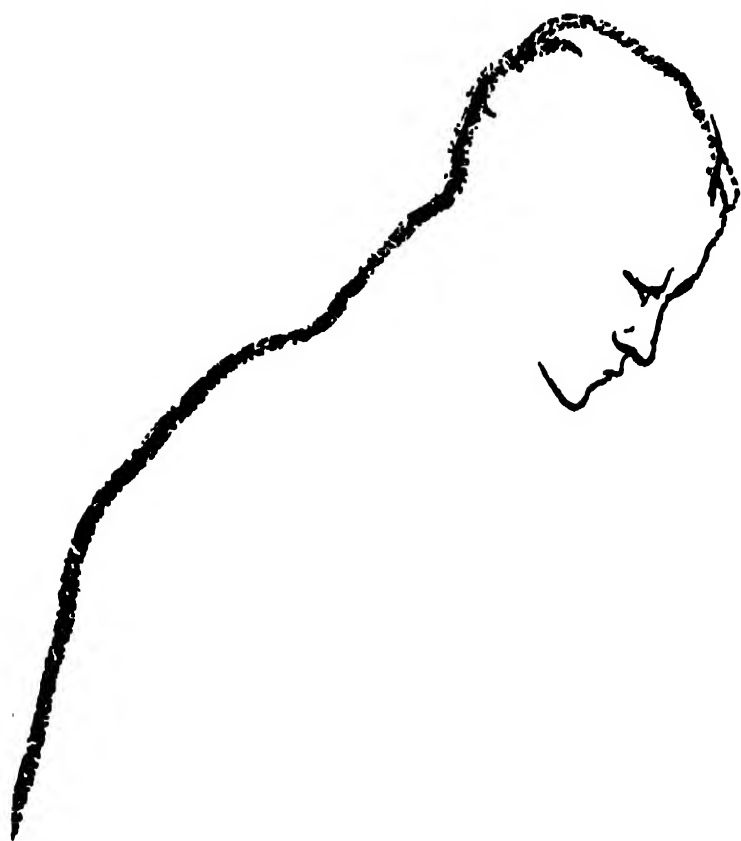
"Zizi," said Marte, bringing the plates, "I haven't seen you do that for a long time."

"But when I was a mountain boy I whiled away the evenings thus," said Zanic softly in his native tongue. "Do you remember, Mother Helen? Do you remember the goatherd who came to sit on your stoop?"

The old woman was at the sink, but hearing herself addressed she started. Her eyes turned in her face and rested for an instant on her son-in-law. It was as if those

eyes were staring from a prison, the terrible prison of her flesh brought low, with all her sinews and her bones, and in which the heart yet ached.

Zanic stared at her a moment before returning to his work.



CHAPTER EIGHT Sandy liked to make love with the lights off. He was embarrassed to show his face in the grip of passion, to have Ellen see his contorted features, his straining neck or the fluttering of his eyes locked trancelike at the top of their sockets.

But Ellen would have enjoyed the sight of him in her subjection. Sometimes his whole body quivered in the darkness, like a fish leaping out of the ocean. At such moments he was weightless as though the spasm had lifted him from her bosom. Ellen never gave herself away in such a fashion, but stayed perfectly still, relaxed, sure, and almost passive. His shivering limbs sent no tremor into her own. His final cry struck forth no echo from her throat. She gave herself and yielded sup-

ply with a smile of irony or pleasure on her lips.

Once, when they had gone to bed early, the telephone rang. Sandy jumped away from his wife as though the sound were a stranger entering the room. Panting and with staring eyes, he felt as though he could break the instrument to pieces. Ellen answered it unperturbed.

"Hello—Gerry?" Her voice sounded cool and rather puzzled. It brought Sandy out of his state, like cool water running over him. Ellen turned on the light and, smothering the receiver against her bare breast, said: "It's that Gerry West."

"Gerry West?" he asked.

"Yes. You know, the dress-shop girl. The friend of your client, Ray Sullivan. They want us to go to a night-club."

Sandy looked at his wife resentfully. 'Little does she care,' he thought to himself, reaching for a cigarette. He was annoyed by his trembling hands and by his wife's body, nonchalant, yet naked and still glistening with his own sweat. "Tell her we can't possibly come," he said. But as Ellen lifted the receiver to obey, he cried hastily: "Oh well, if you want to—" because all at once it was a shameful thing to be in bed by ten.

Ellen shrugged as she hung up and gave him a strange look.

"What's the matter now?" he demanded crossly. "Don't you want to go?"

"Zanic's going to be there too," she said by way of reply.

"You mean that strange-looking Balkan sculptor?"

Ellen nodded, crouched on the bed. "Maybe he'd be a client too," she said, craning her neck to see herself in the mirror. For some reason, and she could not imagine why, the very mention of the sculptor made Ellen's heart pound. She was neither in love with him—how could she be?—nor afraid of him, but the fact was that he had begun to bother her just by that pounding of her heart when she heard his name.

"My, you *are* taking an interest in my career," said Sandy, not sarcastically but fondly, and once more he forgave his wife, as he often did in his mind, for being herself. "Well," he continued, "if he's anything like Ray he'll always be having troubles and rows."

"He's not like Ray, anyone could see that," said Ellen.

Sandy was not listening and continued on his own train of thought: "Most of their squabbles are nonsense, but it's experience, just the thing I lack, you see." He grew silent, fighting the feeling that he would never catch up, that the boisterous young men just through their examinations bled a vital sap of which luck (war and his age) had drained him. Law was a tradition in the Hunter family. Sandy's grandfather, flamboyant and virile, had been one of those about whom one reads in books on trials. Many a time, too, Sandy had seen his sire in court, eloquent, handsome, spreading out his beautiful hands, hunching his powerful shoulders. Sandy felt himself attenuated. The law too had changed; successful attorney now meant corporation lawyer, fighting mercenary lawsuits behind mountains of papers. Thus his few contacts with living breathing men who

felt themselves personally wronged were precious to Sandy.

They both dressed quickly, pleased and excited by the sudden invitation, pushing each other out of the way to use the mirror. They had called Betty to see if she could come and be with Janey. They had known it was almost certain she could, for Betty always sat up over her books until midnight and went out only on Saturdays. In fact she was glad to come; the Hunters' apartment was easier to work in than her own crowded home.

Ellen perched on the bed and pulled up her stockings, swinging her leg in the classic manner to tighten them over her kneecap before rolling them around her garters. The sight of Ellen gartering her stockings had a flavor of Don Quixote about it which made Sandy look down at her for a moment, perplexed and almost touched.

"What would I do if we had never met?" he asked. She looked up. "I know," she agreed seriously, "it would have been awful. Perhaps you would have married a bluestocking," she said, and added with a glint of "her yellow eyes: "or become a fussy bachelor."

Ready and awaiting Betty, they took a look at Janey. The little girl was sleeping on her stomach, her head turned to the side. Her cheek was pale and the blue veins fluttered in her temple. She had been sucking her thumb and her fist was doubled up in front of her face.

"What a baby she still is," said Sandy.

"Sometimes she's a woman," said Ellen, turning at the sound of Betty's ring.

It was quiet in the street and their footsteps echoed hollowly on the pavement. No taxis passed so they walked over to Fifth Avenue and along to their destination. Now they were looking cater-cornered across the silent park, which at night was the resort of criminals, of rats, and of huge cockroaches. These last occasionally quit the bushes and traversed the pavement. They were so large they made a rustling noise and their bodies, unchanged and prehistoric, were dry as paper. As for the rats and the criminals, they remained in their jungle, and ground their teeth, and felt the winter coming on.

A bright glow shone between the buildings on the south side of the park as though from a burning town: Broadway throwing its glitter at the sky.

In front of the nightclub a black man received them. He was clothed in brilliant colors, a reproduction of the exotic, but his walk, his gestures, the regard of his earnest eyes, had come no further than from One-hundred-and-tenth Street.

"Full up," he said as a friendly warning.

Inside, Sandy gave his coat to the hatcheck girl, who was extremely pretty. Yet surely no one would have dared to smear her perfect make-up which was only half gelled on her face, like petroleum wax. She looked Ellen up and down with a cool stare whose rudeness was quite unconscious. 'Toney,' she decided, 'the quiet type although that could fool you. In her late twenties. Do I look older or younger than she?' she wondered. 'Am I more or less attractive? Could I take that man away from her if I got the chance?' The hatcheck girl had learned

to think in this way as a means of combatting boredom.

They went down a flight of carpeted stairs from the well of which, as from the pit of hell, a throbbing and heavy blast beat upwards, a boiling music which struggled like a poison in their arteries and which, for all its heat, sent a chill along their spines.

Ray, Geraldine, and Zanic were awaiting the Hunters at a table on the edge of the dance floor. Geraldine had on a very daring dress which showed up the difference in the various surfaces of her skin: face, neck, chest, and arms. She had had extra lashes welded to her own so that her small tight eyes wore an exotic fringe. She smiled at the Hunters and waved gaily.

"Here they are!" she cried.

Ray and Zanic tried to rise and came into immediate contact with other chairs and tables. They merely made polite thrusts with their rumps while Sandy and Ellen squeezed themselves into place.

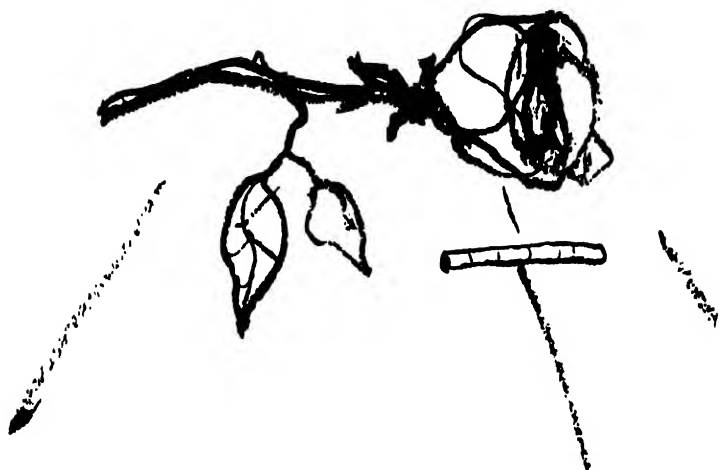
"Yes, we came, as you see," said Ellen, with a nod at Geraldine. She gave the men her hand in turn, her small hand whose nails were cut too short and which was always a little cold. But in reality Ellen felt feverish; her teeth were chattering, and this was the result of the music. There was a man standing in the orchestra and playing a horn, pouring crude notes directly into the bodies of his public. It was the same effect—only of a different quality—as when one is given an anesthetic. 'It won't get me,' one thinks, and yet the drug is already at work.

Ray asked Ellen to dance and she accepted. He was

graceful, drawing her along within the shelter of his neutral shoulders. Geraldine, watching them, could not stop her face from setting.

"Don't look like that," murmured Zanic, leaning towards her. Gerry turned to him with a smile. He was a definite factor in her life and they had an unspoken bargain. Knowing everybody in the expense-account world, Geraldine had helped Zanic's career in a financial way, and it was she who was grateful to him, as it often happens between the one who aids and the one who is aided. Zanic had become a proud possession. And Geraldine herself did not go unrewarded: if she got no agent's fee, she got a name to call, and it was important to call names, because one name attracts another. Such lives as Gerry's are balanced on the brink of professional oblivion—it is a chronic position—and Geraldine did not see below the precipice the sweet stream, the charming meadows of ordinary life. Her eyes were frightened by the depths and she dared not look.

Gerry had another problem as well: the problem of love and its absence in her life. Lately she had tried to believe herself inclined towards Ray, and to believe, too, that living together in appearance would be enough. Her partially starved body, excited by dexadrine, was already frigid. If it suffered through jealousy or desire, it was only as a leg or an arm may suffer when it has already been amputated. It is said that in such cases the nerves continue down a ghostly limb. The palm itches, and the fingers ache.



CHAPTER NINE Now Ellen had never been perfectly sure of what she had seen from the window of the El. That had been a week ago, but seeing Zanic again tonight revived her memory. While dancing with Ray, she thought it over. She had been on her way home that late afternoon from a movie on Fifty-sixth Street. Ellen seldom went to a movie alone, but this was a revival of one she had loved as a girl and she was curious to see if her taste had changed.

If it had done so, Ellen was not in a position to judge, for she had been fascinated by the return of feelings

long out of mind. In the El she had travelled the dozen blocks home, wrapped in a dream world undistinguishable from the past.

'Life seems to have flowed on,' she had reflected, 'yet there must have been a break somewhere, since recalling what I felt in those days is so strange a sensation.'

As the train slowed for the stop, Ellen had twisted around on the bench to see the street signs and had looked thus directly into Zanic's eyes.

'Is that really he?' she had wondered. The big, ugly, square figure thrusting out its head might have been of stone, a monster propped up to garnish the house of her imagination. Ellen had soon erased it from her mind, or thought she had.

The music changed and Ray guided Ellen back to the table and seated her between himself and Zanic. At once the sculptor leaned towards her and asked: "Do you have a double who rides on elevated trains and looks through the windows of houses and into the eyes of men?" As he spoke he gripped her knee beneath the table.

Ellen felt the nerves of her leg vibrate, the muscles tense. "If you don't leave me alone," she said in a low voice but jutting out her jaw, "I'll tell my husband."

Her grimace, so obviously carried over from childhood, combined with the lameness of her threat, made Zanic smile. He looked across at the young lawyer whose long delicately molded hands were on the table. "I'm terrified!" he exclaimed brutally.

In one of those brain pictures that are the very essence and cause of evil, Ellen saw Sandy lying on a sidewalk, destroyed and conquered. Her heart leaped with an anguish from which she could not purge the thrill. Zanic took away his hand but its purpose was accomplished. There is a memory in the blood of women, an atavistic knowledge, that has never been outbred. Its essence is that men must fight for them and that they will go with the strongest. This blood memory is ridiculed and even punished, yet it persists side by side with intellect and education. Ellen changed the subject. "What were you before you were a sculptor?" she asked, turning so that she looked at him sideways and the pupils filled the corners of her eyes.

"I was always an artist," he said, touched in the quick of his sensibilities, for he had not yet quite come to believe in his present compromise. "But I was born a goatherd," he said, knowing from experience that this enhanced his reputation among art lovers. "A goatherd on the Balkan coast."

Ellen's side-turned eyes twinkled mockingly. "And were there little shepherdesses with golden hair like the one someone tried to sell me in a market place?"

"I kept goats," he said, "not sheep." Into the word sheep Zanic put a terrible and honest scorn. As if this genuine feeling had flooded his soul, he clenched his fist and said: "But there were beauties in the mountains such as I shall never see again. Black hair! And those mouths! They stood out from the face."

Ellen looked at the mouth that spoke. It too might once have been beautiful and stood out red from the face, but it had been thickened since and had grown pale.

"Why did you leave home then?" asked Ellen.

"I come from a wandering race," he replied. "My great-grandfather was a gypsy."

"That's one of those boasts one hears around," said Ellen, "only the boaster is usually some fat girl who wants an excuse to wear full skirts."

Zanic's brown eyes seemed to drink in Ellen's words, to drown them, to quench their flippancy as a torch is quenched in a swamp. "My great-grandfather was hung in Setinje for picking pockets," he said.

"What a little crime for death!" exclaimed Ellen.

"We die for much less," said Zanic. "But not in his case, or not that time." The sculptor's face had lighted. His thick lips had lost some of their grossness. "Gypsies know ways," he explained. "My great-grandfather's family put a silver pipe in his throat and when they were allowed to cut him down he was still breathing. —And here it is," he said. "I carry it always with me." He put his hand in his pocket and brought out a silver tube. It was about three inches long and shone from the constant touch of his palm.

"Is that really possible?" asked Ellen, putting up her hand to her own throat and looking at the object with curiosity.

Zanic stared at her hand, at her arm which was bare

to the shoulders and on which a few moles pointed up the moist fresh ivory of her skin. "Touch it," he said.

Ellen by way of reply smiled slightly and put both hands in her lap.

At that moment a spotlight thrown on the floor announced a well-known singer. Ellen was brought out of the circle of Zanic's influence with a sensation of almost physical pain. A chill went up the nape of her neck and seemed to enter the base of her brain. The singer in his long-waisted dinner jacket revolted her, yet she was wedged in facing him and could not turn away. He was languid in the extreme, and the melody of his songs was obliterated by his slow tempo. His eyes glittered as though filled with tears, but they were only rheumy from the smoky air. His skin was blotchy from the secretions wrongly channeled in his body.

"Love me!" he moaned, emasculate, "love me!"

Outside, young girls waited for his autograph and the place was full on his account.

Once again the Negro band closed in, soloing on its various instruments. Marijuana gave the musicians a dreamy stare and enabled them to play increasingly complicated rhythms. Dancers reappeared on the floor.

"Do you want to?" Sandy called out to Ellen from the other side of the table. Sandy danced as a duty, and perhaps he enjoyed it, but he held his partner stiffly in his long arms.

"If you'd just relax," Ellen would tell him, "the music would make a sort of pattern for you." Sandy,

however, would do no such thing and was terrified of looking silly. Nonetheless they were a handsome couple on the floor and Ellen's body was so plastic that it looked as though they both danced well, or rather it looked as though they could dance well but preferred to move rhythmically back and forth, as two lovers sometimes murmur to each other instead of speaking aloud.

"How nice they look," said Gerry, forgetting her antagonism and looking up into Ray's face.

"Now, GW," cried Ray, "you know I'm allergic to pretty couples."

"I think *we* make one," suggested Geraldine, throwing back her head boldly.

"Darling, don't let's kid ourselves." Ray took her hand almost with regret. "You're divine, and I am too, and we need each other, but please, please, let's *not* be a couple."

"What will we be then, Ray?"

"Two beautiful people," said Ray, showing his teeth. He did not think Geraldine beautiful and she knew it. Then he looked out on the dance floor and sighed. "But if I did go in for that sort of thing—" He gave a little nod of his head towards Ellen.

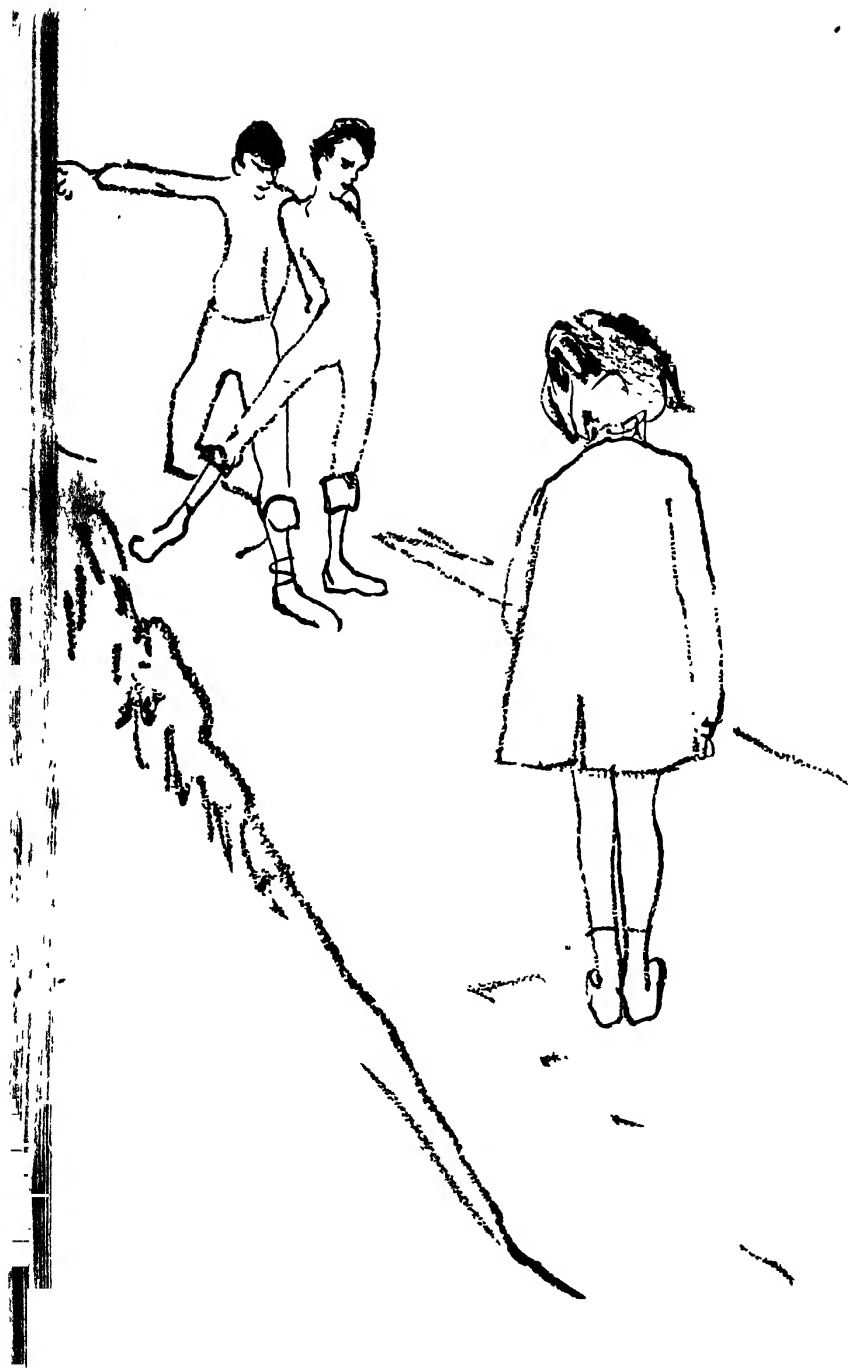
"Why?" It was Zanic's voice. They had almost forgotten him. Beneath the beetling brows his eyes were red-rimmed and his face with its abnormal pallor looked tired, even elderly. The swollen features sagged.

"Oh, Ray always likes the unattainable," said Gerry, laughing lightly.

"Unattainable?" Zanic's accent made the word sound quite different. He began with one of his fingers and a little spilled liquor to draw on the surface of the table. His appearance was transformed by this act and its casual execution. He rose above the nightclub crowd at once, retired into his profession and was curiously ennobled. Almost everyone in the world, it seems, wishes to be something else: the newspaper man starts his novel, the novelist longs for the calluses of a lumberjack, the lumberjack sends his son to college. Yet perhaps the greatest charm on all the earth is that of the professional absorbed in his chosen work. Its very ills attract: calluses, extended muscles, hoarse throats or absent minds—all are made beautiful by the humble and continued effort of the human being, his effort to perfect that which will remain flawed.

Zanic, drawing in the spilled liquor, partook of this charm. Soon the table would be wiped, his drawing be blotted into the cloth. No one would see it or buy it, yet his finger drew because it could not rest, that swollen finger thick with oncoming ill because somewhere at the base of Zanic's head was a gland as big as a pearl, and this gland functioned wrongly.

Ellen, returning from her dance with Sandy, paused for a second and saw that Zanic was drawing her profile. It showed quite plainly if one looked down from above.



CHAPTER TEN On Sundays when the market was closed the whole Taras family went to the park. Even the old woman, Helen, went, and Anna as well. They toured the zoo and then strolled across to the merry-go-round on which Silver still liked to ride. The merry-go-round was housed in an ugly brick shelter almost too small for it, which, everybody said, had been built by graft. It was as though the horses, fiery and beautiful, turned in a prison. And they *were* beautiful, those scarred wooden horses whose foam seemed to fleck the walls. They arched their necks or stretched them out, baring their teeth, and they had nothing to do with the sad little ponies made of flesh and blood

who carried children nearby. No, these were stallions all, or mares, ungelded and unbroken, fiery as the lost steeds of antiquity.

Silver knew that he would soon be too old to ride on the merry-go-round. Already he was casting one eye down the slope to where men and boys were throwing horseshoes around a stake. Then he would lift his head sternly and whirl on. Sometimes his brother Joe was among the horseshoe throwers, but lately Joe stayed by his wife's side on a bench. Maria needed to sit down quite often. She was heavy and the veins in her legs had become swollen by her pregnancy.

Anna sat apart and fed the birds with crumbs. She was envious of other people whom she saw with pigeons resting on their shoulders and arms. Because of her nervous jerkings they would not do the same for her, and the sparrows got out of the way of her hand with an exaggerated alarm that hurt her feelings. It was as if they were mocking her. She sat on another bench than the Tarases because she feared that they would get tired of her if she stuck too closely and not ask her again.

But the Sunday walk was a minor thing, only one of her many anxieties. When the baby came, for instance, it would be very small and would lie upon its mother's breast or in a little cradle. Yet it would soon grow too big for this, and the flat was already crowded. The thought brought a flush of fear to Anna's face. Sometimes she talked about it to Helen Taras.

"You've never been alone, dear," she would say. Anna always used the word 'dear.' It was a habit she had once

formed to make living with her mother possible. 'Dear' was an oil poured over the waters of dislike, humiliation, and utter dependence. Now that her mother was dead, it was only an old maid's nervous trick.

"All your life," she would continue to Helen, "through hardship and good times, you've had people around you. You don't know about what can happen. And by the way, dear, what do you believe about death?"

Perhaps Anna would never have asked such a daring question of anyone who spoke English. She was certain, however, that the old woman could not understand, or certain enough for decency's sake. One could not be really sure.

Anna threw the crumbs over the low wire netting that shielded the grass and the pigeons staggered to the feast. Sometimes a squirrel would come up to investigate, but when it realized there were no nuts among the crumbs, it ran off indignantly, its two front teeth giving it a disdainful expression.

A girl passed, holding a child by the hand. Anna recognized the child immediately although she had seen her only once. She could hear it chattering away in a high voice, giving out opinions to man and beast. The girl sat down on Anna's bench.

"Go and play now, Janey," she said. "I've got to study." She opened her book and put on a pair of glasses.

Janey would not leave her but stood, leaning against Betty's knees, gazing at Anna. "Why does that lady throw bread away?" she asked.

"She's feeding the pigeons, and you mustn't point."

But Janey was interested in Anna's nervous twitches and stared with all her might. Her eyes were an almost milky blue, and although she was too young to frown there was a slight ripple of disturbed skin on her forehead. "Can't you sit still?" she asked, at length.

"No, I can't, dear," said Anna sadly and, as though to make up for it, she added: "but I know your mother."

"I know her too," said Janey scornfully, and twirled coquettishly around.

Betty looked up sharply. It never did to let children talk to strangers. Anna smiled at her timidly. "Mrs. Hunter buys dry goods from me sometimes," she explained, "down at our market."

Anna had the kind of smile that came and went. Sometimes in fact it was more like an uncertain twist of her shabby features. Betty, however, was satisfied and went back to her book. 'I will never be like that,' she thought firmly. 'I will have a *college education*.' The two words, 'college education,' acted on Betty like a drug. She could not see beyond that diploma. Ignorant, young, idealistic, she was struggling in an unnatural circumstance, sublimating her desires when there was no reason to do so. The elixir of her body, steadfastly ungiven, might perhaps turn sour later, her glands secrete an acid juice. But there was hope for Betty, touch and go. As yet there was nothing definite to see. She was only a juvenile on a bench. Her glasses fell down over the round nose, and her legs in their white socks were like two pillars.

"Go and play," she urged Janey.

"The little girl is very pretty," said Anna, "but of course she should be, because her mother is so lovely."

"M-m-m," said Betty sternly, without raising her eyes from her book. Yet she was astonished to see an image of Sandy spring out on the page.

"Mrs. Hunter is quite a favorite in our market," continued Anna.

The thought of Ellen, so aloof and indifferent, being a favorite made Betty look up. "Mrs. Hunter has many qualities," she said, "but I would not have supposed for her that particular one." Betty was proud of this sentence which could have been lifted out of her book.

"Pardon, dear?" Anna's face was still a moment in an effort to understand.

"Mrs. Hunter is mummie," said Janey. "Her real name is Ellen."

Betty sighed and put her finger under the line she was reading. "Mrs. Hunter is difficult to know," she explained to Anna. "I've been sitting with Janey for two years and there hasn't been any intimacy between us." She wrinkled her young brow, tainted with acne insecurely hidden by a curl. "She's just not friendly," she summed up. "Some people aren't."

All this meant nothing to Anna, and now she cried out suddenly: "She's so beautiful!" From some deep spring inside her whose source was mysterious two tears welled up in Anna's eyes. The jerk of her head loosened one of them and it ran along the side of her nose.

"Well," said Betty, not seeing the tears, "of course

she's distinguished—and she's rather blond." Betty had resolved not to put in the 'rather,' but the word seemed to fly into the sentence of its own volition.

"And beautiful, dear," said Anna, humble but insisting.

Janey was growing bored with this discussion of other people's looks. Why talk about such things when it was plain that when she, Janey, hit the world as a grown-up lady no one would bother with anybody else. She adjusted an imaginary purse on her arm. How that Ellen Hunter would stare when the day came! Janey gave a skip which frightened a pigeon, and then was overwhelmed by the discouraging tide of years still to be existed.

Betty was looking out at the lawn with a dreamy expression. Her long brown hair was drawn back into a horse's tail which twitched a little in the autumn breeze. 'Idiot woman!' she thought. 'Poor ignorant rag! She just thinks Mrs. Hunter's pretty because she's thin, or thinnish, and because she has a nice skin. Will I ever be thin and will there ever be no spots on my face?' A doubt crept into her mind; would a college degree really do the trick?

"For her age," she said severely, "Mrs. Hunter holds her looks quite well, I must admit. It's my experience that many women of thirty let themselves go."

Janey, who had run off for a moment, plucked her sleeve. "Betty, can I go on the merry-go-round?"

"You know you just get sick," said Betty, "and anyway you're afraid."

"That was last week," said Janey, opening her blue eyes like stars. "This week there's a big boy riding there."

"You mean Silver, dear," said Anna, after looking towards the carousel.

"Do you think he'd marry me when I'm big?" asked Janey, who was beginning to like Anna.

"I guess he'd be glad to," said Anna, "but you'll have many boys around you then. Tall ones with blond hair, and they'll all be dressed up. You won't look at poor Silver."

"Yes I will."

But Janey suddenly knew she wouldn't and she was grateful to Anna for pointing it out.

The Taras family was gathering itself to go. Maria had grown cold sitting on the bench, for the afternoon had lost its sweetness. Helen would have liked to stay watching her son ride valiantly. He was such a child still that it seemed impossible for her to have borne him and the very thought made her loins ache.

Silver did not want to go yet either. The rhythm of the merry-go-round crashed in his head and the wooden horse, warmed against his true flesh, leapt to life. Silver could see the smoking of its nostrils with their pink sheen, and when he put his hand on the arched neck he fancied that it was wet with foam.

"Stay, Silver," offered the old woman who was his mother, "and I'll stay too."

But Silver did not answer her. Anyone but a fool would know that she was a foreigner who couldn't speak

English. He would only compromise himself by such company.

"After your little brother is born," said Joe with a nervous joviality, "we'll be able to stay out longer."

Maria for once revolted. "Don't forget," she said to her husband, "that I will soon bear your first-born."

"Of course, Maria," Joe soothed her. "I just keep thinking Silver's my kid."

"After you've got one of your own, it will be different," said his mother unexpectedly, and she fastened her black eyes that had not sunk with age on Joe. "You can't be mistaken then." Perhaps the change of season was stirring Helen's memories, making her sad, rendering her jealous of every human experience which belonged to her. If she did not now hold Silver's young heart, she had once held his very life in hers, and she would not deny it.

"Can't you forget that foolishness?" cried Joe, rebuked by his family, exasperated and ashamed. It was as if he said: 'Mother, can't you die?'

Helen gave her son a bitter glance and tightened the shawl around her shoulders. The wind had risen with the dusk.

The Taras family moved eastwards. They did not call or even look at Anna as they walked away. They knew she would come after them with her maladive step that was nonetheless light. And so she did at once, but then she came hurrying back.

"Goodness, I almost forgot," she called to Betty, who

was herself preparing to leave. "That is, I never thought—I mean, he *said* to give it when she came to our market. But it's as easy this way, don't you think so?" Anna reached into her black cloth purse and fumbled there. "Zizi—excuse me, but they call him that—told me to give this to Mrs. Hunter."

Betty looked down at the object she now held in her hand. "Zizi?" she asked.

"Yes dear, you see he knows she comes to our market. I have some of his things there on sale, although they're not moving fast."

"But who is Zizi?" Betty's voice had risen and she had the feeling of a dream. Anna's jerking head, her corded neck and mouth that worked, had taken on a sinister meaning which Betty could not define.

"He's Joe's brother-in-law," said Anna, mildly surprised at such denseness. "His wife is Joe's sister, dear."

Betty controlled an hysterical impulse to ask: "Who's Joe?"

"And he's famous," continued Anna, "and rich."

Both women stared at the wooden carving lying on Betty's palm. It was jewel clear in the long afternoon light.

"She's got no clothes on," said Betty stupidly.

"No," said Anna, and, as though a whole, long, other sentence was in her mouth, her facial muscles kept on pounding silently. Then, without another spoken word, Anna turned and scurried away.

Betty pondered on the way home, and at first the

thoughts merely passed rapidly through her mind, to find no resting place. She was unable to come to any conclusion and did not want to. Then too, she was confused by the wind rustling in the park which spoke intimately into her ear, into her flesh, into her deep and hidden bones. 'Life is hardly what you think,' it seemed to say. 'Perhaps you will be surprised at life.' For the first time that season it occurred to Betty that winter would come. Yes, and what was more, night would fall. It was as if by mistake Betty had stepped outside the magic circle, the circle of education, of college, and of books. The unknown ground was perilous, the air thrilling and dense.

Betty squeezed Janey's hand to bring herself back to normal. "But how shall I give it to her?" she spoke aloud.

"You're not talking to me," said Janey, lifting her pale, clear little face.

Betty took a resolution. Holding out the carving, she said as casually as she could: "Look at this funny thing which the lady gave me. I wonder what it could be?"

"Oh, that's mummie." Janey spoke without hesitation.

Betty hesitated and then said: "Janey, you take it and give it to mummie. But not until I've gone home." She thrust it into the pocket of Janey's coat, but Janey at once took it out again. "No, leave it, Janey, and show it to mummie after Betty's gone home." 'Am I being despicable?' wondered Betty. 'Was that woman despicable too?' She did not know and could have wept.

Certainly the carving of Ellen meant something, but this something was obscured for Betty by the Puritan outlook she had developed during adolescence. Then, all at once, it came to Betty quite clearly that Mrs. Hunter, Ellen, was married. This was one premise, and another was that she, Betty, was single. From there it was hard to go on. All paths were dangerous. 'It's not right for a married woman,' she said to herself at length but without defining the 'it.' Anyway Mrs. Hunter had Mr. Hunter, and he deserved more, much more, than it was in any woman's power to give—any ordinary woman, that is. Oh if only she could meet a man like that! What a beautiful life! Betty saw herself in Ellen's apartment, discussing important things with Sandy. She would sit at his feet and look up with the long hair shining over her shoulders. Sometimes he would reach down and stroke it, rolling the curls to their ends. He could never do that with Mrs. Hunter because her hair was too short and, besides, did not really shine at all.

Janey tugged at Betty's hand, breaking up the picture. "Look at those bad boys coming," she said. "Let's pretend we don't notice them."

The 'bad boys,' a little troop of ten-year-olds, raced by, shouting and jumping. One of them had a ball. They did not look at Janey although she put on her haughtiest expression.

The leaves all over the park were on the move, a sad and urgent sound: autumn, fall, despair of half the world.



CHAPTER ELEVEN Ellen was enveloped in a cloud of steam which curled the ends of her hair. She was lying back in the bathtub and lazily soaping one leg which she held in the air. Ellen's leg was a little short, judged by modish standards. The kneecap protruded boyishly above a slender calf whose muscles were not round enough. But these traits, or defects, enhanced the fine ankle, the delicate thigh and the pure hairless grain of the skin.

At that moment Ellen heard the apartment door open and then Betty's voice calling: "Mrs. Hunter, are you there? May I go now? I have a date."

"Yes, go along, Betty," Ellen called back, and she added halfheartedly: "Thanks."

After a moment Janey herself appeared. "Tell Daddy to take off your coat and hat," said Ellen. "He's in the other room."

Janey ignored this suggestion and examined her mother carefully. "You look like what I've got in my pocket," she said.

"How do you mean?" asked Ellen, putting down her other leg and reaching for the sponge.

"I've got something in my pocket." Janey spoke in a teasing singsong.

Ellen squeezed warm water on her neck and shoulders. Those parts of one which stayed out of the water always felt cold. "Why don't you try that act on your father?" she suggested. "He's more susceptible and he'll take off your outdoor things for you."

"Daddy doesn't want to see what I've got. It's a ladies' secret," said Janey, still in an affected voice.

"I don't want to see it either in that case," said Ellen, "because I hate ladies' secrets."

Janey took her hand out of her pocket and threw the carving into Ellen's bath. Then she ran off to her father.

For what seemed a long time Ellen did not touch the carving which floated on the water and rode the tiny waves made by her limbs stirring. Moisture darkened the wood so that it was almost black and, like a ship riding over a shallow ocean bed, it moved over the greenish landscape of Ellen's body. Then, all at once, as

though it were alive, it turned and thrust itself against her left breast.

Ellen gave a gasp of surprise. The carving had been going in quite another direction and now it had rammed so hard against her she imagined herself bruised by impact. She felt as though something or someone had knocked urgently at her heart and, catching up the carving in her hand, she examined it carefully.

'Am I crazy,' she wondered, turning it from side to side, 'in thinking this looks like me? Is it only an illusion, a sort of misplaced ego?' But Ellen found herself exactly represented, even to the secret—she thought—flaws of her body. It was all there: the straight shoulders, the muscles running from her armpits to her breasts, the swayed back, the hips whose fullness balanced on her slight legs with their fragile ankles, their boyish knees. Someone had seen these things with his inner eye, the eye of his desire. He had stamped them on a block of wood and introduced it into her home. But how? Ellen was aroused. 'All those old tricks! Doesn't he see that they're absurd in New York. And if they're not absurd, they're worse. They're criminal! For what if magic works after all?'

Ellen so far, however, was only teasing herself to excite the superstition which lies so deliciously beneath a woman's skin. Thus she was taken unawares by the tremor which ran over her body and left it cold in the steaming water.

'The time has come for me to give this some serious

thought,' she told herself and, to prove it, turned the waste tap with her toes and let the water run out. 'First, how *could* Janey have gotten hold of the wretched thing? Has it been hanging around the house unknown to me? And for how long?' Once again a twinge of fear startled her. Yet how could there be danger? And danger from a middle-aged man with a face to mock or to pity. The very thought was silly. 'So if I'm not tempted,' she concluded, 'there is nothing to fear no matter how many such tricks he plays.'

It was strange that the very absurdity of it made Zanic impossible to discuss with Sandy. One was proud of an attractive man's admiration. One could tease one's husband and boast about it a little. But Zanic!

'Just the same, I must ask Janey how she got this,' Ellen decided, and at the same time realized that Janey probably would not tell. Wheedling only made her coy and there was no such thing as forcing the truth out of that soft, melting baby flesh. 'Perhaps she won't even know,' thought Ellen.

The last of the water receded from her body and Ellen's weight turned heavy once again inside the porcelain tub, yet she stayed there. Because, all of a sudden, for no apparent reason, Ellen had begun to dream. She still held the carving in her hand, and now from the wood a current seemed to penetrate the arteries of her wrist and be swept up into her heart. She was dreaming of her youth; that is, of the days between adolescence

and marriage. Pictures succeeded themselves across the screen of her brain. First there was the hand-holding, the wrestlings that were somehow not all play, the sudden fevers, the silences that interrupted childish. Later, the violent kisses given in cars, on beaches, stairways, and the sick wild frustration of virginity.

Ellen even recalled a time when she had thought herself pregnant because she had bumped into a boy when they were both in bathing suits. She had planned to throw herself under a train if it were true, and when she saw that she was safe how thankful she had been! Oh those resolves so irrevocably broken!

Ellen had never belonged to a group. It was always one at a time, and her mother had often disapproved of the choice. She had been crazy, for instance, about a farm boy whose slow shy ways were mingled with brash talk. They had gone haying for one blissful afternoon and her skin had been covered with prickly heat. Ellen could smell the hay now, alkaline and accompanied by feverish sneezes. The hayrick, drawn by a Percheron, had seemed a chariot. How light her heart had been and her still childish limbs. How warm her cheeks that sunny day!

After the farm boy had come the glamorous Shelby—Shelby Lawson who kissed all the girls and who was more beautiful than any of them. He had cheeks like peaches with their blond down, not a blemish anywhere, and hair the color of taffy. When they danced together

at vacation balls, she and Shelby, they were like statues come to life out of Grecian marble: the boy-girl, the girl-youth.

Another had followed Shelby, and another: tough Jack Mullen, who had blacked one of her eyes—not an unpleasant sensation; Pierre with his accent, his knowing kiss; Ril, jazz-mad and smoking reefers. Oh there were many. There had been time for them between thirteen and twenty-two, time for many kisses, many words, many promises. One by one their faces rose up and sank once more into oblivion; their hands reached out, their tongues stammered, their eyes shed tears.

The sides of the tub had grown cold and now a sense of sadness, of loss, scoured Ellen's heart like a bitter wave and left it aching. How did things stop being the present and turn into the past? Without warning the moments were gone and they would never come back. They were over, over; just as girlhood was over, and romance.

Ellen started to her feet and threw the little statue behind the tub.



CHAPTER TWELVE Helen Taras, that secret woman, rose early. She was a fitful sleeper and could hear through each night the sounds of battles fought in darkness: of Silver growing, the light and sometimes painful creak of his joints; of Maria sighing, soon travailing; of poor Anna in her nightmare; and lastly of Joe, stretched beside his wife, exuding even in sleep his male energy. Helen arose at five-thirty each morning to make Joe his breakfast before he went to the wholesale market. He ate sparingly as he broke his fast and he drank a small glass of alcohol, a strong colorless liquid from his native land.

Helen herself was often out of the flat by seven. She had never got used to the flat and preferred the market. Actually she was sick for her home in Setinje and would never be cured. There, the door had been open all day long, and the cooking done outside. Helen scorned the modern conveniences which in America are almost a religion, and she was in dread of them, too. Used to feeding resinous sticks into a brick oven, the gas flame disgusted and frightened her; its odor was a poison to her nostrils and she thought she could taste it in the food. As for the bathtub, Helen had been clean enough without it and she was a clean woman. To let the fragile organs of the body: liver, lights, and womb, soak in near-boiling water was sheer stupidity. Even the toilet failed to find favor in her sight. It forced one through a sort of false gentility to assume an unnatural position. Helen was no traitor. Her erect soul would never deny her own country nor the habits of her youth.

Thus, leaving Anna to wash up, Helen would depart. On Saturdays she was accompanied by Silver who, free from school, was proud of working like a man. He took the place of Maria by his brother's side during the morning and sometimes, if he felt like it, in the afternoon as well.

Silver, although he would not admit it, liked these early journeys with his mother. Perhaps this was the only moment during the week he felt she was his mother. Walking beside her thus through the fresh new morning, he felt attached to her, even protective. Later

on, of course, his old attitude would return, his defiance of her, his vexation at what he considered her stupidity. Silver had delicate nerves. They were frayed by everyday living, and his heart was uncertain of itself, distrustful of all that it felt.

After the old woman had helped Joe to arrange the vegetables, she sat down in her accustomed place. Sometimes she shelled peas, and at others prepared specialties which had only to be put in the oven later. Her head would bend over her work, showing the grey pull of her hair. One could see by the harsh tone of the grey that it had once been jetty black. Her fingers, thickened at the joints, rolled, pressed, or shelled by the hour while she mumbled softly to herself.

Anna was often the last to arrive at her stand in the market. She had fallen into the habit of tidying up the flat, making the beds, and cleaning the floors. There had been nothing said about this, but nobody stopped her. Before boarding with the Taras family, Anna had been the drudge of a mother whose death, over a year ago, had left her to inherit the dry-goods booth.

Poor Anna, she had not lived much. She had been simply a robot, a doll assembled carelessly and clumsily in her mother's womb, created, it would seem, only to obey, to work, to listen to complaints. She had never questioned her lot, yet on the morning of her mother's death, Anna had been surprised at a sweet lost flutter in her bosom. It had been like the wings of a frightened bird.

Sometimes, on arriving at her stall, Anna felt as though her mother were still beside her. As she lifted the old canvas cover from her wares and dusted them with a feather duster, she had to turn around to make sure. Her mother, whose legs had been painful from overweight, never stood, but sat all day knitting something bright-colored and self-destined. A length of purple was now left forever unfinished on the needles. Anna, putting away her mother's things, had touched it with a shudder. It had seemed like the vomit of a terrible and crushing ego, an ego that had taken Anna's life and made her tremble, that had jerked her head on her neck and was now trying to jerk the soul out of her body.

On this Saturday morning Anna hurried with her housework and, leaving Maria in a chair beside the window, she walked the long block to the market, thinking deeply. No one would have given her another glance, a shriveled woman of uncertain age who looked, with her spindle legs and long head, as though she would have had a hunch on her back. She wore a dark coat, dusty and old, while a net, which she believed to be invisible, covered her hair. Who could guess that this woman was going through a profound experience?

Just now Anna was pondering on Zanic. His actions, could she be sure of them, held an intimate meaning for her. It had all begun with Joe Taras giving her those statuettes to sell. Or no, thought Anna, one could not say where it had begun, only that, looking back on it, this had been the first indication. In any case, the next

event, in retrospect, was when Mrs. Hunter had come and looked at them and asked about them. Well, and what of that?

'What of that? What of that?' The passing El seemed to gather the question out of Anna's brain and repeat it on up the avenue.

Anna looked up at the train and frowned. 'Yes, *you* were next!' she muttered moving her lips. 'You can't fool me. I saw Mrs. Hunter as plain as he did!' Yes, Mrs. Hunter had been in the Elevated train the night Zanic had come to supper. Anna was sure of it. She had seen that pale face clearly, like a picture framed by the window of the train and hanging, or so it seemed, on the walls of the buildings opposite.

"Ellen Hunter," Anna said aloud. She was pleased to think that she alone beneath the Taras rock knew the first name. But of course Zanic knew it. Perhaps he had said it over to himself: 'Ellen, Ellen,' as he carved her image that same evening. Anna wished now that she had given the carving directly into Ellen's hand. She had not dared. Throughout three whole days it had burned her pocket, yet when Ellen passed her stall, Anna had looked the other direction, fearfully, as though avoiding an enemy. And perhaps there was something fateful in the way her mission had been at length accomplished. Perhaps it was meant to happen in that way.

Immersed in such reflections, Anna started suddenly at the hooting of a horn. The horn belonged to a truck and the driver, sharp-faced and red-necked, leaned out

and cried angrily: "Die at home, cantcha? You're blocking traffic!"

Anna looked around her fearfully and found she was in the middle of a wide and unfamiliar avenue. 'I must have passed the market,' she said aloud, as though excusing herself to the world. Crossing the avenue, she looked around to get her bearings. It had begun to rain; the fine, keen rain that comes from icy clouds and that covers the ground with slime. But despite this and the fact that she was hatless, Anna did not retrace her steps and went on her way eastward. A novel thought had occurred to her, a realization that the dry-goods stall belonged to her and that she could arrive when she liked.

Eventually Anna came to a railing which overlooked the river—or, rather, it overlooked the big parkway skirting the river bank. Once, not long ago, this parkway had been non-existent and the street had yet an air of ending at a waterfront. It was now perched astonished and forlorn over the maw of traffic below. Anna stood near the railing and looked across at Welfare Island. She wanted to see if she could pick out the hospital where her mother had died.

Anna had been naively astonished at her mother's fear of dissolution. The woman had been a mystic; that is, she had often talked of 'passing on' and of her extreme beauty in other and more Egyptian lives. Anna had sometimes wondered why that antique beauty had not followed her mother into the twentieth century. Certainly no trace of it remained, except perhaps a dark eye so liquid as to be almost rheumy. Aside from that,

Anna's mother, who was called or 'called herself Rhea, was a fat woman. She had one of those white skins into which the blue veins creep and lie like worms. Her hair was thin, curled all over, and bleached to resemble a baby's. Her hands were pudgy. Unable to cope with knife and fork, they were greasy from pushing at her food. The dress on her bosom was greasy, too, that huge yet unmaternal bosom which at the last had melted like snow.

Rhea had preached love and had wondered loudly why all on earth were not happy and united. Let anybody cross her, however, and that dark eye would flash, that soft jaw set so hard it quivered. Over her small kingdom she held all-powerful sway. She was a ruler whose domain held one subject, one valet, serf, and slave: Anna.

Staring at the island, Anna mused upon her mother's end. How vivid those last days remained in her memory. How the dark rheumy eyes of the sick woman had protruded from her face as though staring with terror, as though bathed in a sweat of anguish! And how callously, with what indifference, the nurses had treated the all-powerful Rhea! This fact had impressed Anna more than anything. They had commanded her, and when she broke the rules through weakness or despair, they had scolded her as one would an unloved child.

Anna had gone out to visit her mother every evening, walking to the ferry station and then to the hospital. It had been summer and the nights were starry. In the big ward lit only dimly here and there one could not see the stars, and the soft wind which entered doorway and win-

dow became laden with the odors of disease, of the mortal sores, of drugs, excrement, and tears. Anna had approached her mother's bed with stifled loathing and had forced herself to hold the wasting hand in hers. Rhea had spoken little, but with those great, staring eyes had gazed at her daughter.

One night Anna had brought some sherry, but her mother could not drink for she was in her death throes. Anna looked down upon that face which might have been a stranger's. There were two deep creases between the eyes and these—actually a frown of terror—gave the dying features a wrathful twist.

Later, in the ferry, Anna had looked out over the black river in which a few stars were lost and seen again the expression on her mother's face. Then a great sign advertising biscuits had thrown a troubled message on the water and she had whispered fiercely or desperately to the night: "Well it isn't she that's going to live, it's me."

Anna, standing today beneath the pearly rain, wondered if it was that voiced defiance which had brought her mother back. But 'brought back' was not really the way of putting it. The nearest definition was that a series of sensations had thrown Anna—or so she felt—to the mercy of a foreign power. It happened almost every night and in the same fashion. First, a black gyre would start whirling inside her, not in her head but in the very core of her body. She was sucked into it as the swimmer is sucked into the whirlpool. Feeling the first tugs of the gyre, which were soft and almost rocking,

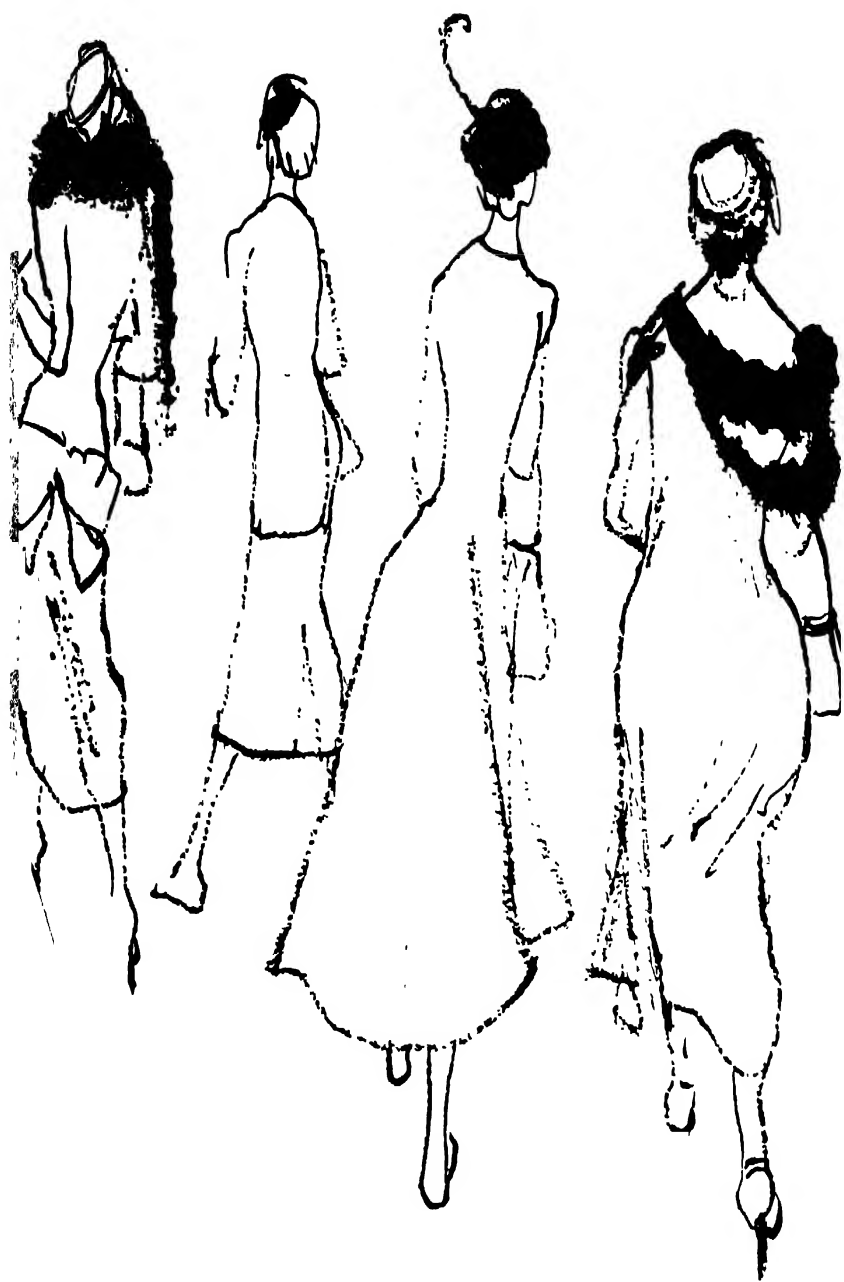
Anna would begin to struggle. She was not asleep. She could hear noises in the street, or even see a light turned on, but she was bound as it were with invisible cords. Even her eyelids were thus bound, locked three-fourths down over her eyes. Her struggle was to move one muscle, no matter which, and once she succeeded in this she was saved.

So far she had not failed. Drenched with sweat and shedding tears, she had yet started out of her trance. Yes, those tears she had withheld on Welfare Island flowed now nightly. For Anna was convinced that down in those central whirlpool depths her mother waited. Like an insect, like one of those hairy spiders which children find and of which they later dream, Rhea crouched within, awaiting her prey. 'Ha,' she seemed to say with her voice pressed against Anna's blood, 'even your life, jerking, ugly, sick, is better than none.'

Anna had left the flat in which she had lived her whole life and come to stay with the Taras family where Helen's presence in the same room gave her comfort. Yet Anna was not cured. If her obsession had been lightened by company, it had also grown familiar to her, and almost necessary.

Anna looked up into the rainy sky. 'Behind those clouds are clouds,' she thought. 'And behind that more clouds.' Yet they said that airplanes rose up until there was blue sky around them and the clouds were like a field beneath, covered with white lambs.

'But for all that, no airplane has found heaven or even a trace of it,' she murmured to herself.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN Geraldine was talking to one of her best customers, a Mrs. Stilwell. Mrs. Stilwell was a fashionable woman with a correct taste in clothes. She was in her fifties, discreetly handsome and with a carefully slender body that was noticeably unsupple, as though to be lithe were vulgar. Mrs. Stilwell prided herself on knowing all sorts of people, artists included. She often gave dinners to which they were invited and, although she hated anything bohemian—her interpretation of poor—she could be gracious to those among them who tried to live as she did. She knew both Geraldine and Geraldine's parents.

"But you ought to get married, my dear," she was saying. "To be successful in a career, as you *are* of

course, isn't enough." Mrs. Stilwell had her own way of speaking to younger women, a semi-intimate way calculated to put them at ease. Everything she did was 'semi.'

"Well, perhaps I will," said Geraldine, "when I find someone as nice as Mr. Stilwell." They both laughed at this comfortable lie.

"Husbands are made, not found," said Mrs. Stilwell. "If you can handle a difficult customer like me, you can handle a man."

"Isn't it funny, Amy Coster was saying just the same thing to me last week," cried Geraldine, unable to resist mentioning a powerful woman whom they both knew and whom she had certainly not called Amy. But Mrs. Stilwell understood this and herself was careful to have friends that could be mentioned. Now she took her cue.

"Isn't *dear* Mrs. Coster a wonderful woman?" she said, thereby subtly rebuking the 'Amy' since she herself and Mrs. Coster were on first-name terms.

Geraldine was feeling tired; a constriction at the nape of her neck made her head ache. The thought entered her mind that she did not really care much about Mrs. Stilwell, or Mrs. Coster either. And as she drew the curtains of the dressing room, she wondered if there were not some country, or even a city, in the world where people were just people and one need not care which of them one knew.

'But it's really my job to care,' she defended herself. All the same she suspected that it was a habit and that

she had taken it. 'I should have a husband,' she decided, 'although not like Mr. Stilwell. Rather, a real man, ignorant of false values and loving me for myself.' An old song came back to her, one in which she had firmly believed at sixteen: *'Some day he'll come along, the man I love.'*

Well he hadn't come along, or if he had, she had failed to recognize him. It was as though Geraldine had, during adolescence, stifled her femininity in its natural channels and driven it into others: those of ambition, snobbism, and petty jealousy. She shook herself irritably as Mrs. Stilwell's voice called her.

"Come here, Gerry, and give me your advice."

There was a smell of toilet water in the booth and of lavishly used deodorants, a female odor for all its disguise that made Geraldine's headache worse. From the mirrored walls their reflections came back to them from all angles.

"Goodness, I could do with a new diet, couldn't I?" said Mrs. Stilwell. "My derrière is getting out of hand."

In Geraldine's shop almost everyone said 'derrière' as did the fashion magazines which these women read. The breast or bosom they called 'my bosooms,' exaggerating the double 'o' to show they were only joking and weren't really taking that part seriously.

Geraldine summoned the fitter, who arrived with pins already between her lips. Mrs. Stilwell turned this way and that on command.

"You know, I'm having the salon redecorated," GERAL-

dine offered. "I'm having a real opening for the spring collection. I'm expecting Zanic—the sculptor, you know—any minute."

"Zanic?" Mrs. Stilwell asked, reflectively. "Have I heard of him?"

"You must have!" cried Geraldine, really distressed. "He has done so many things. Why, just in last month's *Vogue* they have his head of Candy de Tudelos." And she could not help adding: "Of course, it was a bad reproduction."

"Oh, of course," said Mrs. Stilwell, but she was annoyed. She was not in the Tudelos set and did not want to be, not really, yet she was nonetheless irritated that Geraldine West should have access to it.

"My dear, you do see all sorts of exciting people," she said. "But you must be careful and not get too arty and forget your old friends."

'There,' thought Gerry, who had met Tudelos only once through Ray, 'I needled her on purpose.' "I won't, Mrs. Stilwell," she assured her. "Although one can't help meeting people and they will call one up. I'm especially helpless because they know I'm here all day."

She implied that many dissolute, artistic men were forever trying to get her in their clutches. Her long earrings dangled beneath her black hair, and all of a sudden she looked lost and pathetic. Mrs. Stilwell, who had been feeling ruffled, was now soothed. She put on her dress and gave her final orders in a brisk, business-like manner. On her way out, to show that she had tri-

umphed, she bought one of Zanic's little statuettes, and left just as the artist himself arrived.

"That woman's husband is head of Flexer Plastics, you know," said Geraldine in a whisper. Zanic turned to look after Mrs. Stilwell, but she had become vague, a head in the crowd of the outer store. "I might be able to get you a mural there," she continued. "They haven't redecorated since I can remember."

"You are a good girl," said Zanic in his strained voice, which was like that of a man troubled with a sore throat. For an instant his eyes rested on her, sable, impenetrable, yet giving out a dull glitter. Gerry flinched away.

"Oh," she cried gaily, "you've brought sketches. Are they for my salon?"

"Of course," he said with a secret smile. Drawing chairs close to the table, he sat down and took from his portfolio the clumsy drawings with which some sculptors first express their ideas. "I thought," he began, "that on each side of the portals you should have two life-sized statues of women. They will be nudes which we will drape together; identical twins who have been separated, who miss each other even for the space of a few feet." The idea of this ugly middle-aged man expressing himself thus was almost clownish. Nonetheless, it lent his words an erotic tenderness.

Gerry saw that the drawings were quite obviously of Ellen and a discomfort that might have been indigestion troubled her stomach. Only because it was accustomed,

almost chronic, did she know the feeling for jealousy, the kind of jealousy that is not intense or passionate and that has nothing to do with love. This emotion makes the lives of some women miserable, and it might well ruin their stomachs too.

"Are you pleased?" asked Zanic, who was never arrogant about his work.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I like the kind of girls you usually draw better." As she spoke, Geraldine took up one of the figurines on the table, a long-legged young girl whose big, outstanding breasts and long hair were superimposed, as it were, on a boy's body.

"An artist must change," said Zanic. "This new kind of figure has got into my fingers." He moved his thick hand across the sketch. "Now I see something less perfect modernly, but more perverse, less sportive, but more sinuous."

"It looks like Ellen Hunter," said Geraldine brightly.

"Yes," agreed Zanic.

"Oh, you meant it to?" Gerry opened her eyes as wide as they could go to express astonishment and incredulity.

"Why not?" asked Zanic, noting her expression.

Geraldine forced a laugh. "No reason, really, but I shouldn't think Ellen had that good a figure. I mean, she isn't particularly well-proportioned or anything, is she?" As Zanic made no reply and looked silently into her face, Gerry grew embarrassed. "Well, not fashionably speaking," she said.

"You women!" exclaimed Zanic at last with a sigh. "Always jealous of each other. What are we poor men to do since one woman is never enough. We must have several to represent our various aspirations and they should love each other like friends, like my sisters here."

"Well, I might just as well say that we needed several men!" cried Geraldine.

"Some women might, but I don't think you need any man. You are complete in yourself, like an Amazon." He said this as a compliment and in such a way that Gerry was forced to accept it as one. In any case they had time for no further conversation because Geraldine's attention was claimed by a new customer.

The client this time was unknown to her, a big woman whose face was rendered insignificant by rolls of fat beneath the chin. The extra flesh was creeping up on her face. Having devoured the line of her jaw, it would soon swallow the small, pursed mouth and the button nose. Even the eyes, brown as a spaniel's, were not safe, and now these doomed eyes looked peevishly and anxiously at Zanic.

"Well, I really don't like to discuss clothes in front of men," she said.

"This is not a corset department," said Geraldine, who believed in being firm with this type of customer. She must have had the right attitude, for the woman's expression lightened and she went into a booth with docility.

Zanic could hear the murmur of women's voices muffled by carpet and curtain. No matter how ugly, he reflected, how old or ill-formed, some women kept their love of clothes. Perhaps Geraldine's customer never paused to wonder why. If she did she must surely feel the hand of fear upon her head.

The sculptor had remained sitting at the table, his powerful and larded shoulders stretching the jacket of his suit. One of his arms lay across the open portfolio of sketches and it was hard to believe that they had been drawn by its effort; these dainty forms which, as in all his present work, had in them little aura of reality.

Anna, when she came, approached him charily from behind. It had required courage on her part and ingenuity to find him. Neither was she used to a big shop such as this. She had even been afraid to ask directions of the salesgirls because they looked too proud. Richly clad, their very hair, dressed in strict curls, had been intimidating. These women surely led extraordinary lives to keep themselves so spotless, to have such white, moist, uncalloused hands.

"I hope I'm not intruding," Anna began. "Your wife told me I'd find you here." She said these words in a breathless voice, jerked up apparently from the tremor within her. "I told Marte," she continued, "I said Joe gave me a message for you." Leaning on the table, Anna peered at Zanic's profile, but she jumped back when he turned.

"And did he?" Zanic regarded her heavily and without interest.

Such a look was worse to Anna than the cruelest words. Yet there are men who so regard all women too old or too ugly to love. Either because of it, or because of her own temerity, Anna flushed and stammered out: "Yes, that is—no—no— I just wanted to speak to you, to ask you—" Anna had fixed in her mind exactly what she was going to say, but now she wondered what it possibly could have been. Down near the river an hour ago flashes of clarity had come into her brain. It had all appeared obvious. She had only to find Zanic and talk to him.

Anna clasped her hands and pressed them together, as though by exerting physical strength she would be saved. But one hand simply fought the other, that was all. Finally the silence must have exploded in her head for she brought out: "You are a fascinator."

Zanic took the greyish pulp of his lower lip in his teeth. His fist clenched on his drawing. Then he started to laugh. Opening his mouth and throwing back his heavy face, he laughed softly but with abandon. He showed gold fillings and his tongue and, behind that, like his tongue's child, the pointed soft palate, palpitating, convulsed with mirth. Then he stopped. The faint red that had struggled through his skin receded, leaving it sallow. His mouth pouted and a look of resentment thickened his lips.

"Did you think that because we are two monsters we might marry?" he asked in his soft, cracked, accented voice.

Anna was bewildered both by his words and by his expression. Her hands unclasped themselves and she held them a moment in front of her as though to fend off the meaning of his question. 'Heavens,' she thought, 'what have I said? He thinks I meant—he thinks I meant—' Yet even to herself Anna could not complete the sentence.

"Mr. Zaníc," she cried, "don't be angry. It isn't that at all!" And as the sculptor's expression remained lowering, she continued, trembling with exasperation and shame: "But don't believe that nobody wants me because somebody does—just as you want Ellen Hunter."

With a lithe movement that was startling in such a heavy man, Zaníc reached over and seized Anna's quivering hands in one of his. "Why, you're sick, Anna. Those are sick fancies, old maid's fancies. At home we would put leeches on your toes."

"But that's just what I came to tell you," she said, "except for the old maid, of course." Anna was wincing and jerking her arms against his grasp. "I came to tell you that it wasn't natural and that I'd run you no more errands."

"Oh?" he asked. "Was that really what you came to tell me?" His powerful grip that was yet fleshy ground the bones of Anna's fingers together. But now, as

quickly as he had imprisoned her hands, he released them.

Anna looked at Zanic pleadingly. Under the jut of his brows his eyes remained cold, unfathomable, as dense as the water of a swamp.

"I thought it was," she whispered and, turning, almost ran out of the salon.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN Although Zanic's carving of Ellen was made of wood, it now performed a living work in the Hunter home. Everybody noticed it. Abigail rescued it from behind the bathtub two days after it had been thrown there. The servant was turning it in her hand as Janey came prancing up.

"Mummie plays with that in the tub," said Janey. "She's too big to do that, isn't she, Abby?"

"Such trash ought to be burned," said Abigail, her Catholic soul sensing witchcraft as well as immodesty.

"She shouldn't play in the bath," insisted Janey. "I *told* her so." And looking up sideways with her sly, bold eyes on Abigail's face, she suggested: "I'll look like that too when I'm big."

"You ought to have your mouth washed out with soap!" cried Abigail. "I can't think what your mother could be about, leaving a dirty thing like this around."

"A lady gave it in the park," said Janey, copying the quality of the servant's voice. They were two virtuous women now discussing the shortcomings of a third.

"What lady, Janey?" asked Ellen from the doorway in a quiet, almost indifferent tone. She had just come in and was still wearing her outdoor things. She did not wait, however, to hear Janey's reply for curiously enough, she was now unwilling to delve further into the mystery.

The fact is that Ellen was becoming trained to Zanic's desire, or rather, to its manifestations. In the bull ring such training is quite apparent. The bull becomes visibly impregnated by the rhythm of the matador. It is sometimes apparent, too, in the boxing ring when a fighter who is failing, whose face is covered with blood and whose eyes are half closed, will perform a senseless dance to the tune of his victorious enemy. There is an obscure and subtle thrill in this mastery which is greater than mere brutality and gore, and this thrill is felt by both vanquisher and vanquished. Ellen was now beginning to experience it. She did not, of course, take it seriously. Why should she? For what in the end could

Zanic do to her? She was hardly seduced by his person. She had only to think of his monstrous face, pulpy and strange in color, to feel repulsed, and his work awoke in her no reactions of any kind. Yet the acceleration of her lazy heart's beat amused her, distracted her and made her moody.

"Perhaps it's just the weather after all," she said to herself as she threw her coat on the bed.

That same morning she had gone downtown with Sandy to his office. A great aunt had left her a little money and there were papers to sign. Thus, at eleven o'clock she had found herself adrift at the end of Manhattan Island.

Ordinarily Ellen would have descended the subway stairs at once and gone home, but today she wandered for a while among the narrow streets whose contrasts intrigued her. The air had a deceitful quality, close and warm, as though filled with smoke. She had been told that the haze of Indian summer was caused by rotting leaves. Yet it was hard to think that mere leaves could print the skies of this gigantic city whose chimneys, whose rivers, whose dust, must sully heaven itself. Still and all, from some alley a gust would sometimes blow on Ellen's cheek which made her linger. It was as though a snatch of forgotten song had been hummed into her ear, not enough to remember it entirely, just a snatch.

Why was it, wondered Ellen, that a season's change brought such unrest into the human heart. 'Or is it only *my* heart?' she asked herself. 'Is it because I too am

changing?' And then the thought came to Ellen that all change must from now on be for the worse.

Ellen had, somewhere in her mind, an appalling honesty. She placed her use in a world that no war or politics could change. But when this use was over, she saw no other purpose ahead, no vital or interesting one, that is. Men cast off women who grew old and ugly. If they were not allowed to do so by law, they did it in their hearts. Ellen found this right; she instinctively agreed with it. Until now the moment when she herself would be so discarded had seemed far off. Today the hazy breath of autumn brought it near.

Ellen, immersed in these reflections, was walking down a poor and narrow street. She was not looking where she was going and her heel caught on an uneven part of the sidewalk. She tripped and fell heavily to the ground. As graceful people who have been suddenly awkward do, Ellen remained for a moment as though stunned, sitting on her hip and gazing blankly at the ground. Then a man helped her up. She saw his sleeve as he put his hand under her arm and pulled her up and then his back as he bent to retrieve one of her gloves. With a gesture so resigned that it might have been a sigh, he handed it back to her and she saw him for the first time. In some barbarous country and for who knew how small a crime, the man's nostrils had been torn out, destroying his face.

"Thank you," she murmured, meeting his eyes which

were dark above his mutilation. He did not smile or speak, yet his glance plunged profoundly into her body and sounded its depths. Then he turned away.

Ellen walked on and became conscious of the stinging pain in her knees. She had fallen onto them squarely and now realized that they were badly scraped. Looking around her, she saw the filth of the street. Remains of food thrown into the gutters had rotted together with papers and refuse and were folded into a sort of gigantic pie. The rain mixed it, the sun baked it, the wind powdered it with the dust of coal and with smoke. Ellen shuddered. 'I might get infected in such a place,' she thought. Pulling up her skirt, she examined her knees. They were bleeding. Dark drops were pressing through her stockings, mingled with lymph from the flayed skin. She felt a sort of removed pity for them, as though they were two wounded animals, small, wild, pulsating animals of the woods.

'Did he feel that way when they cut his nostrils?' she wondered of the man who had come to her aid. Had he mourned his looks? Had he asked pardon of his body for having let it be outraged, for having been too weak to defend it?

A dusty tree at the end of the street marked a small square, a triangle rather, with some benches and a patch of grass. Reaching it, Ellen sat down to recover from the shock of her fall and to get her bearings. The sun now shone through the haze and could be looked at straight

on, a ball as red as blood. The soft air fell around her like a mantle. Ellen leaned back on the bench and brushed away the locks of hair which had fallen into her eyes. It was peaceful here because all the children were at school and the park was so small, so mean and insignificant, that it was neglected.

Only an old woman shared it with Ellen, sitting on another bench with a big paper bag at her feet. She was rather fat and her face had the sweet expression of a grandmother on the maternal side. Her brow was only slightly marked with worry, and her lips moved. As Ellen watched, the old woman undid her coat and reached inside it. Then from her bosom she pulled out folds of different rags. She was like those conjurers who pull innumerable kerchiefs from a hat. Ellen was fascinated by the number of layers with which the woman covered her breast. At length, however, she must have reached the garment she sought, for she paused and drew from her paper bag a pair of spectacles. Then she began literally to read the piece of stuff she had selected. Her absorbed air, her glasses, the way she kept muttering to herself, all gave the illusion of studiousness. Now and then she was rewarded, for Ellen saw her snap her fingernails together and shake the dead louse to the ground. Then she would put the cloth back into her bosom and start all over again, reshuffling her rags until the one she wanted came to light. She paid no mind to Ellen and might have been alone in all the world.

The sun shone on both Ellen and this old woman. For them both the air was soft and hazy and Ellen had a quick absurd desire to take the derelict by her hand and lead her home.

'Perhaps,' she thought, 'if I were living in medieval times, I might really do so.' People had been—or so fancied Ellen—crueler in those days yet more compassionate, richer yet poorer, sicker and more robust. Leaning back on the bench, Ellen saw the great towers of office buildings encircling them about and thought: 'After all there is contrast still, and I am glad.'

Then in the mesh of her nerves she felt again the maimed man's glance and the weight of his sigh, cursing and forgiving all at once.

Looking into her purse for a handkerchief with which to wipe her knees and dust off her skirt, Ellen's hand closed on a foreign object. Had she sensed in her soul that it was there all along? Was it that which had been giving her strange experiences, or rather making her aware of them. Slowly, almost mechanically, she drew out of her purse the silver pipe that had saved Zanic's ancestor on the gallows.

Ellen was sitting with one leg crossed over the other and now as she examined the silver tube her free foot began to jump with the double stroke of her heart. She would never know how the tube got into her purse, because she had not even seen Zanic since the evening at the nightclub. But neither had she known about the

wooden carving which had come to her so mysteriously by Janey's hand. If Ellen had been less languid or less feline, she might have reacted differently to these absurd tributes. As it was, something in her nature accepted them. They were twisted into her life with a thread of fate. Thus, gazing on these outcasts of society, another outcast had spoken from across the grave. The tube had grown warm from her hand, but it had been warmer surely in a mortal throat. Had the man gagged as he put it in? Had they swung on his legs to make sure he was dead? If so, how had he had the courage to stop moving, to stop dancing on air, as they put it. His very pulse must have made him jerk as Ellen's foot was jerking now. At any rate, his gypsy relations had cut him down, still living, and he had taken to the mountains. It was his blood that flowed in Zanic's veins, outcast's blood.

Ellen stood up. Her knees had dried and stiffened and she limped along, asking directions until she got to a subway. The noon hour was approaching and the streets were filled with hurrying businessmen. Most of them were big, even fat, and their faces were tight beneath hat brims. They did not bother to look at Ellen, for women as such had no place in their working day. Some of them were poor and many of them were rich, but none of them had time to look up at the smoky sky with its round bloody sun. Beneath their waistcoats, however, beneath their jackets and greatcoats, was the naked and vulnerable man, the fighting, the predatory. Ellen looked at

them amused and, once or twice, moved aside to avoid being pushed.

Sandy would be among these men, walking his loose-jointed walk. Yet if he were to pass, he would look like all the rest, and not even recognize her. Ellen smiled as she thought that not one on the crowded sidewalk would have held a rose in his teeth or carved her likeness or conjured the felon's tube into her bag.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN And Sandy too was beginning to feel a change in the atmosphere of his home. There were new things in it which affected him. There was the little carving, for instance. But although every woman in the house recognized this object as Ellen's, Sandy did not consciously do so. He only felt that it was somehow familiar and assumed that it had been bought, or perhaps been there all along, in among other of Ellen's girlhood treasures. Nonetheless, almost without his knowledge, the carving gave Sandy one of those obscure shocks whose action is delayed, as

if it must pass up through blood, through sinews, and through nerves before reaching the brain.

The silver pipe was another thing come into the apartment lately. Sandy ignored its use, yet when he first laid eyes on it, it was as though he half remembered it from somewhere. He had seen it from the corner of his eye in the nightclub no doubt, or else its apparent uselessness puzzled him into sensitivity. Not enough to ask about it, however. Women often have mysterious objects about them, objects having to do with beauty or hygiene. It was just there, another alien object in his surroundings which he could not account for.

Tonight Sandy himself added to the list. He was tired as he mounted the subway steps on Lexington Avenue. The lights blurred in front of his eyes. His hair lay flat and colorless on his head and his temples were begrimed with soot from underground. It was six-thirty and already dusk. Above, the beam of a few stars was sifted through clouds. They had not yet been rivaled by the city lights which would later blaze like phosphorus on suburb, marsh, and sea. Sandy turned down his street and almost collided with Zanic's bulky figure.

"Hello there," said Sandy, recognizing the sculptor at once.

Zanic, who appeared lost in contemplation, gave a start. "Hello, Mr. Hunter," he replied in his caressing voice to which the oncoming night lent an equivocal undertone. "I was just taking a walk," he added, "trying to get fresh air."

"Why don't you give it up and come for a drink at our place? Ellen would be glad to see you."

Sandy took Zanic's silence for consent and they turned and walked down Seventy-fifth Street together. They strolled along, lingering a little in the evening, which was heavy and curiously warm. In a dark doorway two men stood talking as they passed, and Sandy saw that one of them was lame. The yellow wood of his crutch shone in the street light. There was an urgency about the conversation of these two which struck one, although in their murmurings no words stood out.

"They are telling each other terrible secrets," said Zanic, himself speaking in a hushed tone.

Sandy could not help smiling. It took a foreigner and an artist to say a thing like that, or a woman. Zanic's freedom from the convention of men's talk as Sandy knew it made him a little envious. "Secrets about what?" he asked, turning to the heavy man at his side.

"Who knows?" Zanic shrugged and spread out his hands. "About crime, perhaps, or love. They are the same, are they not?"

"That's a Roman Catholic viewpoint," said Sandy.

"I am not a Roman Catholic," protested Zanic. "I am Orthodox." There was a world of reproach in his voice.

Sandy believed one to be as outlandish as the other. He glanced back at the two men in the doorway and only the gleam of the crutch told him they were still there. Perhaps they *had* been saying terrible things to each other, but Sandy doubted this. He even wondered

if there were any terrible things to say. "Life becomes more exciting through a belief such as yours," he said. "We Protestants have the dull end of the stick."

"Oh." Zanic shrugged. "The church only makes use of a power that exists already. Any witch can do as much."

This kind of talk intrigued Sandy, yet he thought he had gone beyond it, as the man has outdistanced the child whose prattling he enjoys. Artists, foreign ones especially, were rather like children, still terrified and fascinated by the dark and yearning after glittering things.

"What you need is a drink," he repeated firmly just before they reached the steps of No. 161.

But Zanic probably recalled something in a hurry because, putting one of his hands on Sandy's arm, he said: "No. I am sorry. I may not drink, for I have an appointment and am late already. Give your wife my regards."

Sandy glanced down at the hand and wondered how Zanic's big swollen fingers could manipulate the clay of his profession. He was surprised, too, at the lightness of the touch on his arm. Yet Zanic's gesture had a sort of warmth, feminine almost, which penetrated Sandy's sleeve, an animal fluid by which his precise nature was relaxed. Then Zanic was gone and Sandy, turning as he mounted the steps, noted that the sculptor was pausing near the doorway where the two men had been whispering.

'He's not in such a hurry after all,' thought Sandy.

'He just found something more interesting than coming with me.' And Sandy was a little jealous of someone who could be so much at home in the world. Then he opened the door and in doing so, as the hall light fell upon the steps, saw a rose on the stoop.

Ellen was sitting on the sofa reading when her husband came into the living room. She was studying Chaucer's *Troilus and Cressida* for Sandy. One of her legs was drawn up beneath her and the other was crossed over it. Ellen's limbs were delicate enough so that such positions were not awkward. On the contrary they lent her a provocative and fragile grace.

"I've decided I'm exactly like Cressida," she said, looking up at him and putting her finger on the line.

"I've brought you a rose," he said, tossing it onto the open book. "I picked it on the city street, well, doorstep, really," and he added slowly in a bemused tone, "because it seemed exactly like you."

'Now why did I say that?' Sandy wondered with an inner start. 'It's not true. Ellen, my Ellen, could never resemble this thick red rose. I've always connected her with lilies, such as she carried at our wedding.' Yet the rose *had* looked like Ellen, there on the stoop, so much so that Sandy had not hesitated to take it up.

Ellen toyed with the flower and smelled it, but its petals, so dark as to be almost black, were impregnated by the odor of New York. Only from the center of the flower came a slight and rather sickening breath.

"What a funny fellow that Zanik is." Sandy sank

down beside his wife. "But curious! I almost had him up for a drink, and he ran away at the last moment."

Ellen, playing with the rose, saw it tremble slightly in her hand. There were markings on its petals as though it had been bruised by someone's fingernails. Holding it up, she could see the light from the lamp near the sofa shine through these crescent bruises.

"Where did you see Zanic?" she asked.

"On our street. I almost knocked him down as I turned the corner. He was walking around, getting inspiration no doubt, and, by the way, have you ever seen his work?"

"Have you?" countered Ellen.

"Only reproduced in newspapers. Horrible! Yet he looks like a serious artist. Because he's so ugly, I suppose."

"I find him fascinating," said Ellen, touching the petals of her rose.

"Fascinating?" asked Sandy, amused and putting up his feet to the coffee table in front of them. "Because he's a bad artist and an ugly man?"

"Fascinating because he's a fascinator," retorted Ellen, feeling with an almost sensual pleasure the acceleration of her pulse.

"What a pity I failed to snare him for a drink after all," said Sandy, taking off his glasses and rubbing his strained blue eyes until the rims grew red. He loosened his tie so that his shirt collar slipped down below his Adam's apple. His profile, sharpened by fatigue, ended

abruptly there and could have been the model for some minor saint, ascetic, obscure, carved for a pedestal in a Gothic church.

Ellen had set the card table in the middle of the room and had put candles on it and some silver given to her as a wedding present. In the center she had placed a bowl of sweet peppers which made the silver glow red, green, and purple. Sandy looked at the table and felt pleasure. Ellen's knack was so sure about these things. Without trying, she achieved beauty. Yet through the open bedroom door he could plainly see an undergarment lying on the floor. It was hard for Sandy to forgive Ellen her artistic flair because it was so obviously natural and because, like a coin, it had a reverse side to it.

The Hunters were not going out that evening and now Sandy went to bid goodnight to Janey, who was already almost asleep. Lying in her bed, Janey's face had the happy, safe expression of children who are secure. For this one night at least, her elders would be there all the time. Until she slept, she would be able to hear their voices, a murmuring stream to soothe her brain. Her mother would not be able, pale as ivory, to go out into the world, to 'show off,' as Janey put it to herself.

"I'm so glad you're not leaving me alone," said Janey as Sandy bent over her bed.

"But darling, we never do. There's Betty."

"Oh, Betty! She's nothing," said Janey with contempt.

"I thought you liked her," remonstrated the stupid Sandy.

"I do, but when she comes my mother goes out and you follow her."

"We go together," said Sandy, vaguely wounded in his ego. "And we need to play just as you do."

"My mother shouldn't try to be so pretty," said Janey. "She's not young." Saying these words in an imitation of Abigail's voice, Janey could clearly see her mother in the doorway. Ellen was standing with her weight on one leg as usual, and the curve of her hip was drawn sharply against the light in the hallway.

Sandy laughed indulgently at Janey's words. "Jealous little thing! You'll have your chance."

"Mummie makes men in love with her," said Janey, "and that's wicked."

This time Betty's inflection came out through her baby voice.

"I hope I never have you up against me in a divorce court," said Ellen.

"Ellen!" cried Sandy reproachfully. "What a way to talk to a child!" He kissed his daughter. "You mustn't say mean things about your mother either. Now go to sleep, darling."

But Janey waited until Ellen came to her and sat down near her. Then she put her arms around Ellen's waist and laid her head on Ellen's lap. For a while she lost herself in that maternal darkness. 'If only you would be my mother and *nothing* else!' she seemed to say. Indeed, her whole body murmured it ardently—the arms

with their soft, stubborn stretch, the cheek as smooth as wax, the curled line with which she encircled Ellen's hips upon the bed.

But Ellen looked down on her daughter half regretfully and would not yield. 'You broke me in two once,' she thought. 'I let you pass through me into life and that's enough. Yet who knows, perhaps if I had a son I'd sing him another tune.'

"Good night, you funny monkey," she said, still with a regretful tenderness in her tone. Janey's arms slipped away and she turned to the wall. For this one day she had had enough and she would rest. Tomorrow again her soul would pant thirstily after life, but tonight she knew that she had lost her battles once more.

'You'll die soon—anyway before me,' she said to Ellen, but not aloud, 'and then I'll marry my father and be his wife instead of you.' Her breathing steadied. She slept.

Sandy found the rose on the living room floor and, stooping to retrieve it, pricked himself on its thorn. In a flash he felt a hatred for the flower. Why had he taken it?—someone else's soiled gift, wilted and thrown away. Further, why had he given it to Ellen? How cheap and utterly unlike himself. He shrugged irritably as he sucked his finger. It was the fault of that artist fellow, Zanic, he reflected, with his extravagant way of talking.

Sandy strode about the room while Ellen made supper. Back and forth he went, a tall slim figure, good-looking, too, with his fine hands, his chaste profile. And as he paced, Sandy felt an alien thing in his home. The nape of his neck was sore.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN Geraldine West lived in an apartment of her own on East Sixtieth Street. It was conveniently near her work but it was also dark, small and stuffy. On moving in five years ago, Gerry had thought of her apartment as temporary. Now, in those fits of depression which are the disease of big cities, she wondered if it were not to be permanent, her only home on earth, and it was not enough.

As a matter of fact, nothing about Gerry was enough and yet it would have to do. Sometimes, when she could not sleep after a party, she grew suddenly cold, chilled

by the fact that at twenty-nine she was still unmarried. Worse, there was no one who would ask her. Almost all the other unmarried girls she knew had a stand-by, a man who loved them and whom they despised, a man with bad skin, or sweating hands, who had never heard of Art or Culture—a man who wanted them to cook and have children, a man beyond the pale. Gerry had no such person in her life. She went out almost every evening and she saw lots of men, but either they were married or, more often, they weren't interested in girls at all. Ray Sullivan belonged to this latter group.

Geraldine was trying to make herself believe that she and Ray loved each other. Perhaps Ray was doing the same. Actually they were very affectionate in public, locking their arms, kissing and squeezing, outwardly professing adoration, yet Geraldine sensed strongly that she disgusted Ray. There was a shudder between them which made her more lonely than ever and dealt steady obscure blows to her woman's ego.

Geraldine had been dining with Ray this evening and was now preparing for bed. There were Venetian blinds on her windows and—a fact she would have denied—she left the slats a fraction tilted as she took off her clothes. Then, going into the bathroom, she cleaned her face with an expensive cream. Stripped of all the symbols of her successful career, Geraldine looked quite different. She did not look pretty, but she looked softer or rather younger. Now that there was no one to see her, she put away along with clothes and cosmetics her brisk air. Her expression was forlorn.

Leaning near the mirror, she studied her skin which, at once oily and dry, was still red in patches from its cleansing. The creams she used were far too rich and had enlarged her pores. For no apparent reason the shadow of Ellen Hunter's face came between her own and the mirror, the fine pure grain of Ellen's skin, the shining eyebrows and golden lashes.

'Yet she's not a bit better looking than me, really,' thought Gerry with puzzled irritation, 'and I hate that scrubbed look. Anyway, why do I think of her?' Geraldine asked herself, taking up her toothbrush. 'She is nothing. She has no career, no ambition, and is married to a dull, bookish man.'

Then, baring her teeth, she began to scour them with a sharp, ammoniated powder. Thus occupied, Gerry resembled a black-maned horse whinnying with foam between its lips.

Geraldine's bed was a studio couch and it was beginning to get a hollow in the center because she always slept alone. In this hollow, shaped vaguely like a woman, she now lay down to sleep. To begin with, she took a perfectly flat position with her feet a foot apart and turned out from each other. She put her hands up under her neck, which was rigid as though the spine were muscled with wires, and tried to disengage her mind and pour comfort in it. Gerry believed that by so doing the next day would be made perfect. Perhaps it would, but this was never proved because she always failed in her purpose. Invariably there would come the moment when a sense of lack would render her uneasy

and spiteful so that she felt her nose getting congested in the darkness. There was always some thorn rankling in her side: a party she had not been asked to, or a rival woman—there were hordes in New York—who had gotten ahead of her.

Tonight Geraldine was uneasy because Zanic had brought in the drawings resembling Ellen.

‘It’s not that I mind,’ she told herself, ‘but anyone would recognize them—it’s obvious. Of course, nobody knows her, so it doesn’t matter except that her type is so completely wrong for the purpose.’

At this point in Geraldine’s reflections, the drawings, which she saw clearly against the dark wall of her brain, were transformed into portraits of her own person. The forms, classic and slender, were Gerry as she saw herself in sanguine moments. The breasts, even without their accustomed support, stood out like globes. The straight hips and long lean thighs were softened by a golden glow. Gone was the imperfect skin, the too bony chest, the slack tone of the muscles.

Tears welled suddenly into her eyes. How proud she would have felt had Zanic idealized her thus! Aggravating her disappointment, Geraldine pictured her salon adorned with two such statues—of course, not obvious, yet everybody would know. She saw people coming in and admiring and giving her covert glances. Later, perhaps, she would be put down in books as Zanic’s inspiration. After all, some of his work was in museums both here and abroad. Her face with its

original features, its striking haircut, would be on the road to immortality.

Geraldine smiled at her improvisation, as people do immersed in pleasant dreams. 'Then everyone would think me beloved and no one would know the truth.'

This thought, which had come like a snake out of her bosom, now seemed to bite Gerry's heart. What had gone wrong that on this night or any other in the week none would beg to lie down by her side until the morning? Had she not been an adolescent once like all the rest, trembling with ardor, with anticipation and shame? Where then had that tender creature gone?

Geraldine tried, by breathing deeply, to lift the weight of sadness which now covered her like an extra blanket. Then she turned over onto the front of her body and was suddenly thrust against another fact. She was lying face to face, so to speak, with her own virginity. This virginity, which Geraldine kept a secret, had grown into a monster, a dragon which she now felt could never be slain. How Ray would smile if he knew!

"But *darling*, where 'have you been?" he would smile, but he would never marry her because he would be sickened by the thought of her frustration which he could not ease.

Geraldine pressed herself against the mattress whose hollow forced her back to arch a little. That was the way one bent when waltzing with a good partner. When the partner turned he held one by the waist,

and, from his hand thus centered, one could lean away into the world. One would be secure yet free. But Gerry was only bent by her own form's imprint, like an echo caught between rocks.

With a groan she sat up and turned on the light. Then, the telephone being beside the bed, she dialed Ray's number. 'He won't be asleep yet,' she thought, 'it's only been an hour since we parted.' She could hear the ring and pictured it peeling out through Ray's room above the river. There was no answer. He had left her and gone on to other things, to his own life, no doubt, that palpitating existence from which she was excluded.

Gerry held the phone and let it ring a few times more. Surely now in that other room the chairs were listening, the big gilt mirror, the enormous and cushioned bed. From each to each, like one of those sounds beyond the range of human ears, the message travelled: 'Be still. Don't rustle. Don't creak. Listen, it is the enemy.'

Suddenly Geraldine pressed her finger on the telephone cradle and dialed again. This time she was answered almost at once by the unnaturally soft voice of Zanic.

"Hello," it said.

"Hello. Guess who this is." Geraldine found to her horror that she was speaking in a kittenish way. "It's GW," she said hastily, but even these business initials sounded coy. Zanic made no comment and only the

expectant hiss of breathing came to her ears. "I've just got back from a marvelous do," she said with desperate brightness, "and I'm all wound up. I thought you might stand me a drink if you weren't in bed."

"Just a minute," he said, and she could hear him talking in a foreign language and heard a woman's voice reply. Then he spoke again: "All right. Where?"

"Sammy's," she suggested. "It's between us both. In twenty minutes." She made herself sound brisk and businesslike and hung up without waiting.

He was there when she arrived, sitting in his usual position with one heavy arm on the table and his left hand braced on his knee. He did not rise for her and, after pausing a moment, she slipped into the booth in front of him.

"You look different," he said, fixing his eyes on her face.

"How?" she demanded, smiling and tilting her head flirtatiously. Secretly, however, she was appalled by Zanic's ugliness which the fluorescent lighting did not spare.

"Not so much make-up," he replied.

It was true. She had merely powdered her nose, but her skin, stifled for months and even years, had lost its tone. On her dry pale mouth the traces of her rouge remained in patches.

"Do you like me better this way?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Put on lipstick," he said, and as she did so: "That's better."

"Ellen Hunter often wears no lipstick at all," she complained, and thought: 'Why am I talking in this silly way?' To add to her self-disgust, she got the impression she was pouting.

But Zanic appeared not to see this and did not even acknowledge her remark. "What will you have?" he asked.

"Beer," she replied and then, unable to shut off her speech, continued: "Would you call Ellen a natural girl?"

"She is natural and unnatural," said Zanic, looking into his glass. "She is a woman."

"And what am I?" Gerry leaned forward as she spoke, trying to soften, to moisten, her glance as she met his dark eyes. She put into her question all the troubled longing of her lonely heart, but like her skin, her heart had been stifled. The words came out wrong, frustrated, flirtatious, intense.

"Geraldine," Zanic spoke at once, "we are good friends." He hesitated long enough to drain his glass and then continued: "Why don't you go home to bed?"

Gerry felt as though a glass of icy water had been thrown at her. She gasped. For once her features lost all hardness, became misted and swollen by shame, almost beautiful in fact. "Do you flatter yourself," she cried, "that you'd ever have a chance with me? Why, you're an ugly old man!" Emotion made her choke be-

fore she went on: "Ugly! Yes, deformed and ugly. I'd hate to have you so much as touch me!"

"Would you?" he asked softly, but without embarrassment and, reaching out, he put his hand over hers.

Geraldine was silent, like a horse broken to a standstill. She did not try to take her hand away and a feeling of almost deadly relaxation spread through her nerves. 'Perhaps I'm going to be sick,' she thought.

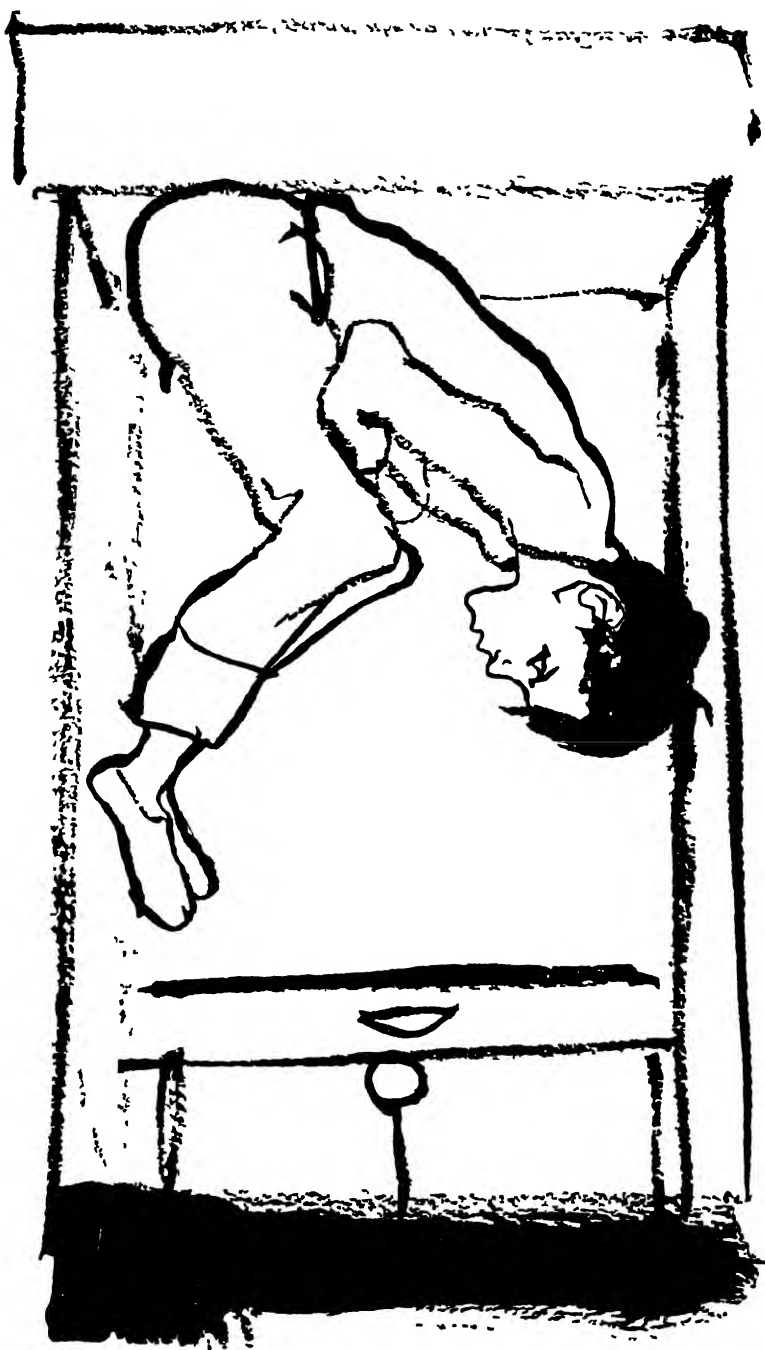
"Let us be friends," said Zanic, "since we are agreed not to be lovers." He even pressed her hand slightly before releasing it.

Geraldine, without quite knowing how it came about, soon found herself alone out on the street. There fury once more overtook her. He had thought she wanted him, had refused what he took for an invitation. He was grotesque with his distorted features, his grey skin, yet he had not wanted Gerry.

'As if I'd ever think of him that way,' she thought with anguish, clutching her arms across her bosom and pinching them through her coat with her long nails. 'How disgusting he is. How gross. I was just teasing him, flattering him, really, and he took it for an advance.' Geraldine grimaced with shame. Her head felt twice its size and the passages of her nose were blocked. They burned as though the salty mucus scalded them. Then she noticed two men walking in her direction arm in arm. They laughed and made little gestures as they conversed. Gerry saw that one of them was Ray.

At once Geraldine composed her expression, smiled in a mysterious manner, and walked gaily forward. She turned her face to the side because she wanted to be looking away when Ray caught sight of her. She would make him aware of her as an exciting woman coming perhaps from a rendezvous, or having just received a declaration of love.

Geraldine had gone several paces before she realized that the two men had already passed her by. She had been only another shadow in the night, had held for them no substance. Turning, she watched their backs. Ray's chesterfield was well cut; his head above the velvet collar, sleek. That sleek hair, those expensive clothes, hid him from her, mind and body. She stood still on the avenue, struck for the first time that evening by the soft, smoky autumn air. It blew into her washed face, treasonous, sweet. It ruffled the stiff short hair on her brow. She felt it on her legs, on her hands, on her throat. And that soft fall breeze spoke to her of love which she would never know.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN The sultry weather made the market sweat. The red paint on the doors glistened and the floor was moist. Even the produce seemed to exude a sort of sap, leaving it tasteless and withered. New York panted for winter but winter held off.

Anna was like the vegetables, wilting in the Indian summer. Her rusty clothes hung on her and the lines in her face had grown deeper. She flicked listlessly at her wares with a feather duster.

Joe noticed Anna's behavior with irritation. It was unfair to break the pattern which one had led others to expect of one. Joe, however, had other things on his mind. Maria was nearing her time and the doctor said it was to be difficult because the baby was the wrong way around. Joe kept his wife at home now and had told his mother to stay there with her. Helen had obeyed his command without question, but there was a strange flash in her eyes, an eagerness misplaced—or so Joe felt—in an old woman, almost a lust.

"Perhaps he'll be a boy," she said to her elder son as the Taras family sat at table.

"We wouldn't mind a little sister either, would we?"

Joe asked playfully by way of reply, and he slapped Silver too hard on the shoulder.

Silver lifted his glance from his plate. His profile, so like Helen's, was stern, his eye half hidden by the lid. He did not answer, but Maria, flushing, cried out: "It'll be a boy. Your *first* boy, Joe." She turned to Anna who was at the stove. "Anna, let's look in that little book you have about the stars. I saw it in your booth the other day."

"That kind of thing belonged to Ma," said Anna, without turning around. "I don't know how to read them."

"It tells inside," insisted Maria. "I want to read about whether it's a son for sure and about how he's going to be a great man."

"I don't think it's right." Anna's features were working. "God didn't mean people to look in those books."

"What are they saying, Joe?" asked Helen.

Joe, his mouth full of food, gave a thick reply. "Maria wants to find out the future from a book of Anna's. What's the point, anyway?"

"No point," said Helen. "I don't have to read books to tell me the future. I know it already."

"You're not about to be a mother like Maria," said Joe. The heavy air was oppressing him.

"I know I've got sons and I know one of them's going to be a great man," retorted Helen, thus showing she understood a little English after all.

Joe pushed back his chair and threw down his knife and fork. "Too many women around here," he said in

English. The curve of his forehead where there had once been hair shone, and he passed his hand over it. His voice was incapable of being harsh, but the stubborn inflection of his words gave them a flavor of anguish. He closed the door softly as he left the flat.

Maria sighed and the old woman, of whom she had always been wary, came and started to clear the dishes. The Taras family got ready for the night. Silver pulled his folding cot into the kitchen and Anna made up his bed. Then she opened out the sofa in the next room to make hers and Helen's.

When Helen had finished with the dishes, she ran the water clear for Silver's bath. The tub was also the sink and although Maria too would have liked to bathe, she was incapable of climbing into it. One by one they washed and went across the hall to the closet, whose uneven rush of water sounded through the walls. Helen put her daughter-in-law to bed. Maria and she could not communicate and had no wish to. Their eyes, cloudy with distrust or with the years between them, were turned away from each other. Yet Helen performed humble, even ignominious services for Maria. She folded Maria's clothes on the chair and finally, kneeling on the ground, took Maria's feet, which were cramped by pregnancy, in her hands and chafed the knotted muscles.

'And who did this for me?' she thought, 'when I carried Silver?' She got a perverse pleasure from her reflection and redoubled her cares. There was a contemptuous fold at the base of her nostril.

Maria suffered all attentions without a sign. The smooth oval face was rapt. Why shouldn't the whole world serve her? Was she not a vessel through which would pass, feet first, the Taras male? "Old woman," she said finally in Italian after she was in bed and Helen was smoothing her blanket, "Old woman, thank you, and you must thank me, since we shall be giving each other son for son." Then the blinding thought came to her that it might be a girl, and Maria started to whimper.

Helen stood waiting in the doorway and desired she knew not what. She received from those muffled complaints a secondary pain, just as the breast or arm may ache when the heart is sick. She could feel nothing of what Maria felt, yet Maria's trouble brought home to Helen the fact that her life was over. Then she went into the other room and heard through the kitchen door the sound of Anna hurriedly washing.

Silver was sitting near the window, watching the Elevated track, and he did not turn around. He was singing to himself a song in English. Helen came up close to him in order to inhale the perfume of his voice. The song, filled with a mixture of sex and prudery, had one of those sliding tunes that lubricate the glands of adolescents. Yet from Silver's lips it rang otherwise. He was ignorant of what he sang and his features were untroubled. His blood had not yet boiled with that scummy soup whose ingredients are desire and fear. Helen, behind her last born son, reached out her hand and placed it on his head. At once his singing stopped.

His spine tensed. Helen snatched her hand away violently and, going to the little wicker chest which held her belongings, took out a bottle of *sapin* spirits. She drank directly from the bottle, three fiery gulps.

Silver could hear them and he said scornfully to the dark tracks outside the window: "She thinks I'm going to turn around, but I won't. She can just swallow the bottle and chew the glass." And at this quip a merry expression sweetened his mouth.

Anna scurried into the room, clutching her dressing gown tightly around her. The hem of a nightdress showed beneath. It was always a surprise to see Anna in nightclothes, and for two reasons: first because she should have been deformed and yet wasn't, and second, because women wore nightdresses and it made one recall that Anna was a woman. It seemed cruel somehow that the act of undressing should be demanded of her, that she should have to expose her sex in all its failure.

After Anna had got into bed—on the inside, the sofa part of it—she turned off the light because Helen undressed in the dark. Helen needed no light to take off her clothes, which never varied, nor did she ever want to see again the transient flesh upon her skeleton. Even in youth, the idea of presenting herself naked to a mirror, to water, or to a man, had never occurred to her. Rather it had occurred to her only in dreams, which her arrogant nature would neither recognize nor recall. She laid herself down beside Anna without a sound and pulled the covers to her chin. Silver had already gone

into the kitchen and shut the door. He was alone in his nightly kingdom.

Anna felt the bed shift as Helen got into it and was thankful for company. She was already beginning to feel the insidious relaxation which preceded her nightmare. One of the shades was broken so they could see the Elevated trains passing their windows, and Anna tried to fix her attention on them. First the track would be dark. Like those barren stretches of wasteland which dot the earth, it had no life and was naked beneath the elements. Then suddenly, forever unexpected, the train would click by, light after light. There was a rhythm in its sound, a melancholy voyager's speech which, although compressed in this one city, yet spoke of far-off places. The train was tracked above the earth and might have been heading for the sky. Anna could quite easily picture it mounting boldly into the cold firmament, lighted, unafraid, between the stars and the moon. How lonely the passengers would feel then with the earth's pull at their bowels. For no apparent reason she recalled Ellen Hunter sitting outside their window the night Zanic and Marte had come—Ellen who, strange thought, lived up the street, Ellen whom Zanic wanted to possess.

Something in this idea plucked Anna's nerves as a hand plucks instrumental strings. 'I must sit up,' she thought, 'I'm thirsty and need a drink of water.'

But Anna did not sit up because she was already entranced. All her outer muscles were numb. She could hear her heart hammering and although her eyes were

locked up in her head, she sensed that the lids were open on the blank eyeballs. She could make no sound or movement. Then the strange motion inside her head began, the motion which so terrified her, half sinking, half rocking. Like sinking into a whirlpool or being rocked to death. Anna knew from experience that one move, one mere twitch of any muscle, would break the spell. She tried to roll the pupils of her eyes down but could not, and her cry of anguish remained prisoner in her throat.

Suppose this were the end! Anna's heart felt as though it must shake her to pieces. The sinister pull inside her grew stronger. Surely that struggling heart would be the first to succumb, to fall into the whirlpool and be lost forever.

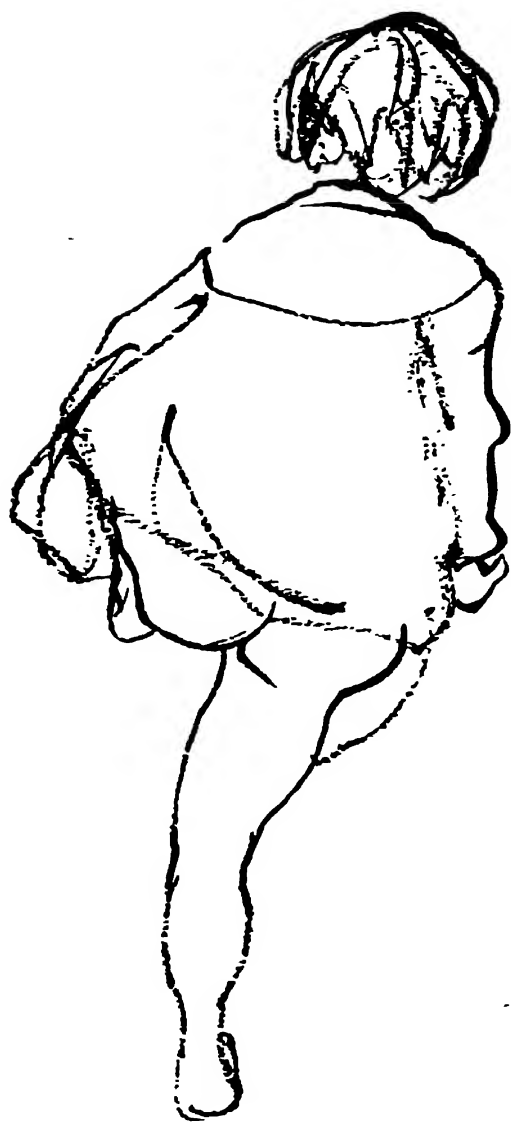
Anna in the midst of her trance heard another Elevated train pass by. It seemed to her that in the clicking of the wheels a voice called out: "Give way, let go. It's only endless oblivion."

"That's Ma speaking!" thought Anna with terror.

Just then Helen shook Anna's shoulder gently, reaching out her long tough arm. Anna was reprieved and woke up.

"How did you know?" she asked, half sobbing. "How did you know I needed to be woken? How do you always know?"

As they spoke different languages, Anna expected no reply, but the old woman in her own tongue murmured with contempt or pity: "I can smell the fear that is in your sweat."



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN Janey woke up early every day. Sometimes she fancied she had not slept at all and this was because her nights were so profound. She opened her blue eyes when the light touched them through the shades and lay for a while in bed, warm and relaxed. Her world of Ellen and Sandy and of the school next door was still asleep. Often she got up and went to the window or even climbed out upon the fire escape. The fire escape was like a series of little balconies joined by metal steps. Janey had even, with Ellen watching, scrambled down that way to the yard below, a sort of fire drill.

On this particular morning Janey ran to the window in her bare feet. She wore a red nightgown, a last year's Christmas present which this year exposed the turn of her ankles and wrists, divine jointings of flesh, tendon and bone, still soft with babyhood and luminous from summer skies. Her fringe of hair, untousled by sleep and the color of honey, gave a solemn look to her eyes and shadowed them beneath in violent moons.

Janey's intention was to go out on the balcony and make water through the metal slats. She climbed over the radiator, which was making its usual morning sounds but was not yet warm. Then she clambered across the sill, blackening her shanks on the coal dust which had settled there during the night. The air was hazy and warm and into Janey's mind there crept that longing for something unknown which later is transformed into regret.

Below, the yards were like fields seen from an airplane. They had their boundaries and their separate color tones. The one belonging to No. 161 was deserted save for a stray cat who crossed disdainfully its graveled squares. Perhaps the locust tree was sentient on which a few limp leaves were fading, but it was hard to believe, looking down as Janey was, that man had purposely carved such an ugly acre out of the earth.

Janey smiled, and crouching on the slats, hiked up the skirts of her gown. She felt wicked, daring and

free. Pulling her skirts up higher, she squinted down between her knees to see how long it took for the water to reach the gravel. Beneath her tender feet the slats were cold and moist. Now and then the two points of her rump brushed this cold slimy surface and sent along her spine a shudder which thrilled her heart.

Because of her daring, the danger and wickedness attached, Janey waited at least a minute without anything happening. At last a clear spurt shot out of her, miraculous and the color of amber. At this very instant however Janey saw that a man was in the yard, leaning against the fence and standing still. Horrified, she could neither move nor control herself although a convulsion seemed to wring the lower part of her body.

"Go away," she cried in a loud voice, but three floors down the man either did not hear or did not heed. Janey resigned herself with surprising ease and stared at him. Even from high up he looked very big. The yard shrank with his presence and beside his thick waist the trunk of the locust tree was changed into a spindle.

Janey rose with dignity and her nightgown slipped down as she did so. For a moment, grasping the railing, she examined the stranger. Most grownups smiled at her and it annoyed her that this one was an exception. Of course she never would have smiled in return, never, never. The very thought annoyed her. He had taken a pad out of his pocket and was marking it with a pencil. Janey watched with scorn. Did he think he was

fooling her? He was pretending to write, but Janey knew grownups didn't write like that at all. They moved their hand in lines across the page. Janey herself often wrote, or it seemed like writing. Sometimes she thought it was and sometimes she suspected there was more to it. In any case, she knew how better than the man below.

"I hate you," she called down, "and I wish I'd gotten you all wet."

Then a hand from inside lifted Janey bodily over the sill. The force of Abigail's slap was dulled by the flannel gown.

"Was there ever anyone so wicked? And you with a bathroom as white as marble!"

"He watched me the whole time," said Janey.

"What would your mother say?" asked Abigail, but the words in coming out simply hovered in the air.

"What would she?" asked Janey.

"That's enough of that," said Abigail. She had not even taken off her outside things and now she did so, showing her neat trim figure, still young, but over and done with.

Abigail sighed as she hung her coat in the dark closet. The heavy somber stuff of it chastened Janey's clothes, which waved like flags from the rack. Then she dressed Janey, or rather helped her to dress, for Janey liked to do everything herself and hated to be touched. After breakfast Janey went to say good morning to her parents.

"Are you ready for school?" asked Sandy, meaning kindergarten. He had cut himself shaving, which he often did, and had put a piece of paper over the nick. Ellen was still in bed. Her waving hair, her nightdress of silk and lace, melted Janey's heart with longing. Ellen put out her arms and cocked her head on one side invitingly. Janey felt as if those cool arms around her were the cruelest things in the world, but they were heavenly, too. From a compulsion which she could not control, she kissed her mother's ivory neck.

"I'll take her to school," said Sandy. "I'm almost ready."

Calling Abigail, Ellen asked for Janey's outdoor clothes. Then she buttoned the child into her coat and pulled a bonnet down over her smooth hair.

"See you later, monkey," she said.

"I'm not a monkey," said Janey to Sandy as they rode down in the elevator.

"Your mother didn't mean that exactly," said Sandy. "Or anyway she meant it in a nice way." But inside himself Sandy was not sure of this. There was something in Ellen that troubled him and eluded him. He felt it was time, after six years of marriage, for her to become known. He wanted perhaps to have her broken a little by life as he was. 'Yet she doesn't try to stay girlish or free or anything,' he thought with a puzzled frown. 'It is just that in a subtle way she refuses to accept the finality of married life. She is still expectant.' Yes, that was it, thought Sandy, who by now was on

the brownstone steps. Holding Janey's hand in his, he looked down at her.

"Janey, what are the other mummies like?" Sandy wanted some special answer, some reassurance from his child, that she would say, for instance: 'They're like my mummie only not as pretty,' a remark he had read somewhere.

Janey, however, seldom replied to a direct question. Now she had paused on the third step. He could feel the drag of her hand, which, lying between his palm and fingers, was pathetically frail.

"Come *on*, baby. We'll be late," he said.

She moved obediently on down the steps and as they rounded the corner of Lexington she chanted: "I saw the man—I saw the man."

"What man are you talking about?" asked Sandy.

"He's always around," said Janey.

Her words sent a message through Sandy's breast, the vague formless warning which speaks to instinct rather than to brain. "Janey," he said, "I don't ever want you to speak to strangers. Even if they say they're friends of ours."

"Strangers are bad," said Janey.

"Well they may be and they may not be. Just have nothing to do with them."

"The man is bad," said Janey.

Sandy crouched down on his haunches in order to be the same height as his daughter and to be able to look into her eyes. He took her shoulders in his hands. "Janey, what man? Answer me, dear."

"What man?" repeated Janey, with so honestly a bewildered air that Sandy could have shaken her. Then beneath his hands she softened, melted and became fluid.

"Your eyes are so pretty, Daddy. I have blue eyes too, don't I?"

Sandy rose with a rueful smile. No point in scaring Janey. And how could one take her words seriously, rhymed as they were by the inconsequence, the unsteadiness, the perfidy of her baby brain.

"Your mother was right," he said. "*You are a monkey.*"

"I like it when *you* say it, Daddy."

Sandy laughed. They were nearing the school steps and Janey had caught sight of the other children mounting them. At once her home life dropped away. She must make today and for many years to come the supreme and heroic effort of the child starting its school day. She hardly said goodbye to her father. Her hand fluttered in his and then released itself through his fingers as a bird escapes through the bars of a cage.

Sandy went down into the subway and set his mind on his work. He reviewed the case he was studying and observed with his mind its various aspects and legal possibilities. Yet during the whole day the two female creatures in his care revolved at the back of his consciousness. He was troubled.

It was as though Sandy had never realized their helplessness before. How terribly they were exposed to the dangers of the world, especially Janey. The thought

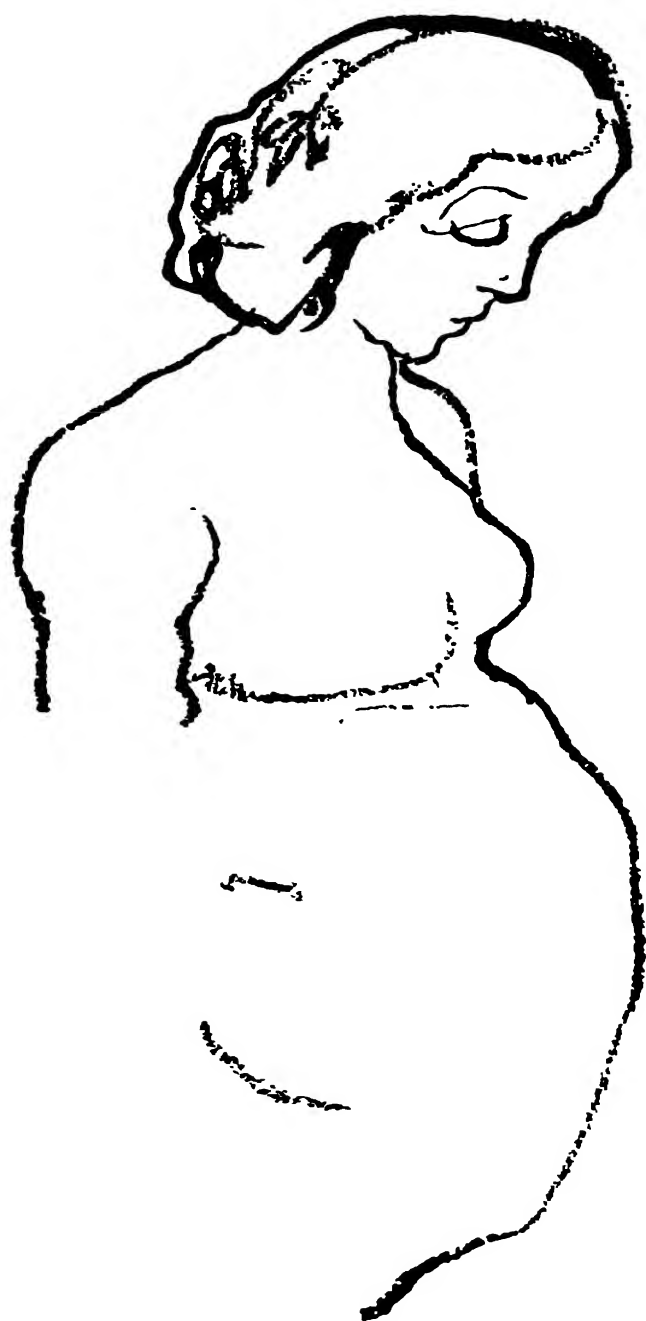
that anything could ever happen to Janey made his heart race. And then he thought: 'But of course. There will be for her as for everyone grief, pain, fear and death. I can't keep any of it away. If I died for it, I couldn't.'

One of those flushes which are like a protest made by the flesh against mortality came over Sandy. He could not bear his thoughts, and recalled suddenly and at an inopportune moment how Janey had felt beneath his hands. How she had softened in his grasp! The transparent pallor of that skin, the coquetry of that smile, sly, female, vulnerable!

The client sitting across the desk from him was much upset at Sandy's expression and at the faint movement of his lips.

"Mr. Hunter, I can see you think it's going to be difficult."

Sandy started. "No, no. On the contrary. We must just see all around the problem."



CHAPTER NINETEEN It was warm enough these days to sit outdoors with comfort. Zanic sat on the stoop of his brother-in-law's house and drew. He used a Chinese ink-stick which came in a little box and had a dragon gilded onto one end of it. Now and then Zanic leaned down and thrust it into a crack between the paving stones at his feet. There was water left there from recent rain. He made bold strokes on the pad which he held across his knees, and although one could not tell what Zanic thought, one could see at least what his eye selected. His usual work, the banali-

ties that had made his fortune, were absent here. The bold untutored line of the mountaineer remained. His mind, stamped unevenly with the life of this modern city, relinquished its impressions one by one and struggled to regain virginity.

Zanic's mouth worked as he drew. He squinted. The light which fell so cloudily through the autumn sky could not soften his features. They were enormous, swollen and pale. One could not possibly see how he had ever been handsome. His eyebrows jutted out above his nose as though sheltering some squat animal. He turned a page and continued his drawing.

On the street, school was let out with a shrill sound. The children spread out from it like ripples. There was soon a crowd of them around the artist. They talked and pointed. Occasionally one of them darted forward to look at his work and then darted back again to safety. There was something in his lumbering movements as he bent to wet his ink stick and in the way he shook his head that was half brute. He was like one of those bears who are trained to dance for ordinary crowds, at once more and less than they—the bear always so troubling because he walks like a man.

Behind Zanic was the dark dirty red of the brick house in which his brother-in-law had his flat. Soot drifted onto it night and day. The wind made by the passing El swirled dust against the windows. A train roared by at this moment and dropped sparks from its furious wheels. Beneath the trestle, where a continuous

twilight reigned, these sparks took on the beauty of flowers or jewels. They were round and large as they fell through the shadows and they were extinguished at varying distances from the cobbled street.

Zanic was bothered by the unseasonable day. It drew sweat from the back of his hands, but perhaps this was only another symptom of his deranged system or of the obsession travelling in his blood. Soon it would be dark, yet he sat on, no longer working and with his thick knees apart. By and by Silver ran up the steps, looking sideways at his brother-in-law but not greeting him. Silver was in a phase where it was painful for him to acknowledge people. As Zanic said nothing either, the boy went quickly and gratefully into the house.

Next came Anna, hurrying too, and in this light anyone would have taken her for a hunchback. She stopped short when she saw the sculptor. The pillars of the trestle thrust her into darkness, but Zanic called out: "Hello Anna! I was waiting for you."

The peculiar timbre of his voice which was broken in his gullet sent a shiver through the woman, but her feelings were unclear. The outer layer of them—admiration for Ellen, fear of her mother's ghost and its association in her mind with Zanic's intentions—were like the lid over a manhole. Jealousy, apprehension, unhealthy obedience moved beneath. Also love, but for what or for whom she could not have said. Was it for Ellen Hunter, already so flawed by the will of another? Was it for this man on the stoop with his soft words?

Or was it for the thing between those two? Yes, perhaps it was this last, because Anna had never been so close to romance before.

She stayed a moment longer beneath the trestle and touched the steel pillar with her gloved hand. There was a hole in her glove and through it she could feel the unyielding metal, moist and cold. A sensation that was almost voluptuous came over her when the Elevated shook the rails above her head. Anna's heart expanded against her lungs. She grew pale from want of breath. Then, suddenly, standing as she was in the street, the darkest street of the city and touching the trestle with her hand, she was taken by her nightmare. The whirlpool of which she was afraid started to turn inside her. Her body, or so she felt, began to shred into it, soul first. Soon she would be but a shell, like one of those sea shells which change inhabitants, into which naked creatures twist who have no covering of their own.

Anna's battle could not have lasted more than an instant, although it felt much longer. Then, convulsively, she managed to take a step towards the sidewalk. She realized, although her ears were ringing, that Zanic was still talking to her.

"Come on, Anna." And as she got closer, he asked in a startled voice: "What's the matter?"

"It's never happened in the daytime before," murmured Anna, safe now because she had moved, but weak and listless. Then, as she stared down into Zanic's face, a new connection seemed to link her life to the

past. Perhaps it was her eyes still out of focus from her near-trance, or else the gathering dusk deceived her. Certainly, for the fraction of a second, the man's face below her wavered, grew flatter, grew rouged and powdered, trimmed with curls.

At her gasp Zanic got up and shook her by the elbow. "What's the matter?" he asked again, this time a little impatiently.

His grasp at once relieved Anna of her fancy. "Oh Mr. Zizi, what you must think of me!" she said in her usual voice. "I had a turn. Why—I thought you were someone else."

The wrenching of her facial muscles made her explanations sound even more senseless, but with the curiosity usual to him Zanic asked: "Who did you think I was?"

Whether or not Anna would have told him, neither was to know, for at that moment an agitated Silver ran out of the house.

"Say Anna, Maria's sick." And he added as though explaining something no one knew: "She's having a baby."

"Mercy, dear!" cried Anna. "You must get Helen at once, and Joe. Run, dear! I'll go right up." She opened the door but Zanic still held her arm and prevented her from entering.

"It's not your affair," he said.

"But—" Anna began, unconsciously trying to free herself.

"You're not wanted, Anna," he cut in. His hand on

her coat sleeve looked enormous. It felt so heavy that Anna thought her bone would break. She could not tell whether it was this pain or Zanic's words that filled her with a sense of suffering. In any case the sculptor soon let his hand drop and they stood there silently for a moment. From an open window above came a woman's scream, but the sound was muted by the noises of the street and El.

The two on the doorstep did not move until Joe arrived ten minutes after. Joe Taras was excited. His clear mellow face was drawn into new lines, anxious yet eager. His mustache was not so neat or so drooping as usual, but had an upward twist. Behind him Helen moved more slowly. By the glitter of anticipation which shone from her eyes as she approached, Anna realized that the street lights were already on. At what moment had they been lit, she wondered? At what exact moment did darkness officially descend? Did day change into relentless night?

Anna stayed on with Zanic at the threshold of the house which she was now too timid to enter. They did not speak to each other, yet she could hear his rather heavy breathing which was like a phrase repeated urgently. By and by, Silver rode up in a taxi and then Maria, big as she could be, leaning on her husband's arm, came out of the house and was driven away.

Opposite, Jack the shoe-shine man emerged from his booth and stood awhile. His teeth under the street light were the only thing that showed. He was happy that another child was coming into the world.

"Anna," said Zanic, "did you ever know that your house has a back yard?"

"Why, of course I did," said Anna. "Mrs. Murphy lets me hang things up to dry there."

"Oh well, never mind that," said Zanic, with an impatient frown as if he had not meant her to answer. "I saw your neighbor a while ago," he continued. "Ellen Hunter."

"Yes," said Anna, putting up one hand to her neck as though to steady it.

"She was going to the market, wasn't she?" asked Zanic.

Anna appeared to nod, although it was difficult to sort out Anna's gestures, the meant ones and the unmeant.

"Why did you leave the market so early today, Anna?" asked Zanic, peering through the darkness into her face. "Did you see Ellen coming in and run?"

Anna did not answer and he went on: "Why run from Ellen? Is she the devil? Well, perhaps she is." He rubbed his fingers along the line of his jaw and his face in the unlighted doorway was more like the muzzle of an animal than a human face. Anna could see his thick lips purse. "Oh happy, short woman's day!" he exclaimed. His voice held in it a timbre that might have been compassion, yet it was sarcastic too, sarcastic, soft, like this Indian summer air. Then he whispered: "Look!"

Ellen, holding a big bag over one arm, crossed the dark avenue. She was on her way home from the mar-

ket and walked languidly in the evening. She did not hold out one arm as people do to balance weight on the other, but thrust out her hip at every step. For some reason this gave her a pathetic air as of one who should never carry burdens, who will never learn how. Yet the thrust of her hip was powerful too, and almost cruel.

Ellen touched in passing the pillars of the trestle. If she felt the anguish of another touch, the conspiracy of other voices, the heavy brooding eyes that watched her now, she made no sign. The expression of her face was lost in shadows.

After she was gone, Anna said in a low quavering voice: "I put the silver tube in her purse, Mr. Zizi, several days ago."





CHAPTER TWENTY It was Saturday night and the Hunters were going to the theatre. They tried—or rather Sandy tried—to do such things together on Saturdays, to put, as it were, a common fact into their cultural lives which could be brought out for discussion afterwards and which might serve to strengthen the rather fine thread of their intellectual intercourse. Ellen accepted these evenings willingly, even cheerfully, but Sandy could never get over the impression that she would have preferred the movies.

Sometimes they went to a concert and then Sandy,

looking quickly at this wife's profile, would see a bored fold to her lips, or think he saw it. "Isn't this fine?" he would whisper, leaning close, aroused by violin or flute. Ellen would nod and smile, but her lips moved dryly away from her teeth. There was no flash in it. Then she would clap politely, keeping on her gloves in order to make more noise with less effort.

Sandy was right about Ellen's attitude to concerts, but he misjudged her as far as plays went. The theatre held for her a deep and subtle meaning which was mixed with jealousy. Never able to make and keep friends of her own sex, Ellen filled the gap with actresses playing their various roles. As with most women, she needed to be reassured at times that she was doing the right thing: dressing, moving, talking, making love. It was as though these unknown creatures poured into her ears those confidences which ease the rivalry of friends. Occasionally she would learn something new and include it in her femininity. Older stars, now retiring, had served to bring her up, to give her a sleek, almost professional, self-confidence and to re-give her a female self-awareness after education had destroyed it. Now, most often, she no longer emulated but judged and compared. She would sit quietly, secretly intense in the dark, and she did not like it if Sandy tried to take her hand.

Tonight Ellen did not feel very well. It was as though there should be a pain or an ache inside her and there was none. Her flanks had a peculiar sensi-

tivity; they were almost sore to the touch. She did not look her best either, but as sometimes happens in such cases her appeal was increased by this fact. A woman on her off days may have a softness, an uncertainty, that enhances her sex. Sandy, on coming into their room, looked at his wife sitting in her slip on the edge of the bed and buckling her high-heeled sandals.

'Why, she's quite plain,' he thought, 'and her nose is red.' At once, a rush of tenderness invaded his heart. He bent and kissed the nape of her neck.

His kiss changed the whole texture of Ellen's skin, contracted it and made the blond tendrils rise.

"I gave you goose flesh," he said.

She smiled up at him provocatively, but she did this from habit and was not really thinking about it. Sandy went into the next room and made himself a drink. When he was in the kitchen pouring water on the ice cubes, Janey came in to find him. She had been in her room 'reading,' after Abigail's departure, and was still holding the book in her hand. Janey could not yet read although sometimes, as with writing, she rather thought she could. It was hard to distinguish between memorizing and reading.

Now she embraced her father's legs and said: "Read to me."

"Can't I have a drink first?" he asked. She nodded and ran ahead of him to the living room. She was dressed in a yellow sleeping suit with feet and with a drop seat that was half open. This opening was like a

doorway onto her soft baby body, immaculate, inviolate, tried only by the struggle of birth.

As Sandy sat down with his drink on the sofa, Ellen, who had finished dressing, went out to prepare their supper. Actually it was ready and waiting in the ice-box, for they would eat another meal after the theatre. Ellen was wearing a dark blue sleeveless dress, pleated all over, which, because of its simplicity and its round white collar, should have been severe. On Ellen it was, as usual, perversely demure. She had buckled it around the waist with a boy's leather belt and had cinched it so tightly that the muscles of her hips protruded. Sandy was filled with irritation at the sight of her.

"Why are you wearing that?" he asked. "You know I hate it." Actually he did not hate it at all.

"I'm happy in this dress," she said. "It feels like me."

"You look like a tart playing at being an intellectual, or the other way around. I'm not sure."

"It works, anyway," she said, "because I always have a good time when I'm wearing this."

"What is a good time for you?" Sandy asked.

Ellen glanced at him once and then away. His question had probably stumped her. She went on out to the kitchen. Sandy took up the book Janey had been carrying, and it was not the fairy tales he had supposed. It was a sketch book.

"So your mother's drawing a little again," he said, feeling pleased. "I always told her she should."

"Is that book mummie's?" asked Janey in a startled tone. She had found it that very morning on the fire escape. Of course one never knew, and it was best to say nothing further since the world was filled with strange facts.

Sandy began turning over the pages which, inside the hard cover of the book, were attached by wire loops. He laughed. "Here's one of you, Janey. I guess your mother caught you out."

"Let's see," said Janey, but when she did she was offended. "That's not nice," she said.

"If it's not nice why did you let your mother find you doing it on the fire escape?"

"She never saw me," said Janey.

Sandy went on turning the pages with a puzzled frown. Although he took an interest in painting, he knew very little about drawing, but it seemed to him that Ellen's style had changed. 'It's probably that thick line,' he thought, 'and then too, she's out of practice.'

Just the same the drawings were recognizable. There was one of the children coming out of the school next door, and one of the shoe-shine man drawn from above as though he had been kneeling at Ellen's feet working on her shoes. There was also a rough sketch of a man holding a little girl by the hand. Sandy felt a glow of happiness. Ellen, the indifferent, the cat-like one, must have looked down from her window and drawn him leading Janey to school. Then there was one of two men in a doorway. Sandy upon turning this page felt

as though someone had whispered, not into his ear, but into the stream of his blood. The whisperer's breath, soft, insinuating, stirred in the branches of his veins as wind stirs in the trees. Yet he hardly looked at the drawing and turned the page in a flash. A self-portrait followed. In thick heavy lines Ellen had depicted herself leaning back against a railing and looking up. Nothing startling, if it were not for the sensuality which was apparent in every line, crudely apparent in the half closed eyes, the parted lips, the exaggerated curve beneath her slender waist. Even the hands, drooping on either side of her from the railing, had a passive look although they were merely sketched—the passivity of the female who has given in.

‘Does she really see herself like this?’ wondered Sandy, and then heard the ringing of the door bell. “It must be Betty,” he murmured, relieved at being able to leave his own question unanswered.

But it was not Betty. It was Geraldine West and with her Ray Sullivan and a woman he did not know.

“We were partying next door,” he heard Geraldine say brightly to Ellen, “and we didn’t think you’d mind if we dropped in for a second.”

Sandy, as he greeted them politely, thought that the unknown woman hardly looked the partying kind, at least the parties Geraldine must go to. He caught Ellen’s eye and she twinkled at him from where she stood.

“Besides,” Geraldine continued, “I wanted you to meet Zanic’s wife. It seems silly not to know her when we’re all such friends.”

Gerry herself could hardly say why she had brought Marte here and she knew Ray admired her for a bitch. Yet perhaps it was not entirely that. Perhaps it was simply to relieve her heart. She saw now with some embarrassment that the Hunters were surprised. She had never dropped in on them before.

Marte looked around the Hunter's flat and decided that hers was better kept. She noticed Janey, retired to a corner, watching them. Then she noticed her husband's drawings lying on the table. She supposed she should be proud that these people knew her Zizi and liked his work, but she could not get over the idea that it was not work at all. Rather it was an amusement and not a very moral one either. Perhaps it was for drawing naked women that God had punished Zizi, had thickened his face, his hands, his feet, had made a mask to cover the man she had married.

"Ver-ry happy," Marte said politely on being introduced to the Hunters. Her wide face was shining with embarrassed sweat, and as she sat down in the furthest corner of the room she wiped her face with a handkerchief.

Ellen did not let her escape, but pulled a chair across the room and sat down beside Marte. As she did so, she, too, noticed Zanic's drawings, or rather the drawing of herself which was still exposed. How had those drawings arrived here? Had Geraldine brought them, or Zanic's wife? No, she had seen no portfolio in their hands when they had come in. Then she looked at Janey, sucking her thumb in the corner.

"What should we call you?" she said at last, addressing Marte. "I never can make out if Zanic is a first or last name."

"My name is Marte," said Marte, who had not understood the question. Her eyes, a little too round but large and dark, roved the room which seemed bare to her and austere. She missed treasures in it: ornaments and souvenirs.

Sandy made them drinks, a martini for Geraldine and Ray, and for Marte some of Janey's Coca Cola. Geraldine came over and sat next to Sandy on the couch. Her face beneath its mask of make-up looked sad. Sandy wondered if it were fatigue or disappointment in love which caused her expression. The truth was that inside Gerry the too ready gall was poisoning her veins. She had seen Zanic's drawing of Ellen and was jealous.

"A little daring of your wife, isn't it?" she asked in a low voice, flicking her hand towards the sketch.

Sandy misinterpreted the remark, but he turned back the page nonetheless.

"Ellen is so fascinating," said Geraldine, "so many-sided. I always wonder what profession she would have chosen if she'd ever had to make a living."

"Oh, she would never have had to do that!" Sandy smiled at the thought.

"What if she hadn't met you?"

"There'd always be someone for Ellen," said Sandy, who, in the way of many intelligent men, was tactless.

Ellen meanwhile talked to Marte, and it amused her very much to do this because no one could overhear them. Ellen had now become so used to the feeling of Zanic's desire and its evidence in her home that to go without it would have been a physical loss. The chemicals pumped into her blood by her accelerated heart had changed its stream, tempo and flow, and had acted on the other juices of her body.

Thus, talking to Marte, her eyes sparkled, the saliva in her mouth tasted sweet. Gerry, she knew, had meant to dismay her, had meant to say: "Look at your rival! Be proud!" But Ellen was not dismayed in the least.

"Do you enjoy your husband's work?" asked Ellen.

Marte shrugged. "It's pretty," she said.

"Do you think he's a great artist?"

"If people tell him enough, perhaps he'll think so," Marte said with a sort of good nature.

Ellen could have hugged herself with excitement and grew more insolent. She leaned her elbows over her knees so that her hands hung down, curious hands with their threading veins, their pointed, separated fingers. "Do you mind your husband being so ugly?" she asked.

Marte too was leaning forward with a polite air of attention. Her forehead, wrinkled to show good will, was beaded with sweat. Now at Ellen's question she slumped back in the chair. "Are you happy that he's in love with you?" she countered. It was hard to make out the tone of her voice. Her accent had an atmosphere of its own that camouflaged emotion.

"How do you know he is?" asked Ellen.

"There are signs," replied Marte, looking across at the portfolio. Then, turning to Ellen, she went on: "It's strange, you are young and pretty. Why should the feeling of an old fat man interest you?"

"It's because he makes such an effort, I guess," said Ellen, reached now by the other woman's honesty and chastened by it. "I'm almost afraid of him."

"And you like that, being afraid?"

"Well, it has nothing to do with me really," said Ellen. "We never meet, you know."

"Perhaps you will meet *once*," said Marte, and to herself she rehearsed the many times her Zizi had gone off for a night or for an hour. It did not seem to matter much. And one day very soon he would come back to her for good. She looked around her sadly. 'Strangers,' she thought, 'these people will always be strangers. New York is more full of strangers than any place I have been in the world. It's because I am a childless woman and was never meant to travel.'

'Is it really me saying all these things?' wondered Ellen, and felt as one does on the day before an illness, removed and astonished. On such days intimate signs over which one has no control transform one's relation to the world. She looked across at her husband and saw that he was staring down at the coffee table with an absorbed look on his face. She got up and walked over casually.

"Well," she said to Geraldine, "how are your new decorations coming along?"

Geraldine took this as an insult, thinking of course that Ellen had seen Zanic's sketches.

Ray, who had been sitting quietly, now rose. "We really must be going," he said. "It was charming of you to let us in. Zanic will be pleased that you've all met Marte." It was hard to know when Ray was sincere.

Ellen went with them to the elevator. Janey ran up to her father.

"What's that?" she asked, putting her finger on the drawing now uppermost.

"It's two men," said Sandy. "Can't you see, it's two men talking in a doorway and one of them is crippled."



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE When Betty that same evening was left alone with Janey she found herself unable to settle down. Usually after putting the child to bed she would fetch a glass of milk and then sit in the living room to study her books. There was always so much to read, so many words to take into her brain. Sometimes Betty would grow sleepy and then she rose and wandered about. She never went into the bedroom or pried in closet or wardrobe. Nothing of Ellen's interested her, but she looked in the bookcases and examined Sandy's papers on his desk.

She liked to read phrases which his eyes had scanned, to drink their meaning as he had drunk it. A romantic heart hidden in the plump bobby-soxer fed on this ethereal relationship. To marry an attorney who read the classics seemed an ideal situation to Betty.

Sometimes she spoke aloud and even pretended innocent love scenes with Sandy. Or else she fancied he had looked at her with meaning, or that he had left out a book or an open marked page especially for her to see. She knew of course that this was fancy, not fact.

Tonight the atmosphere of the apartment seemed impregnated by a strange element. Betty had arrived only just before the Hunter's departure. They were waiting for her, in fact, and were already in their coats.

Had it been fancy to suppose a stricken look in Sandy's blue eyes?

'I know you're unhappy, Sandy dear,' she said now, talking softly to the little mirror in the hall. She had long pondered whether or not to remove her glasses on such imaginary occasions. 'No, after all,' she had once said to the mirror, 'our eyes have been strained seeking the forgotten beauty of other minds.' That time the image in the mirror had almost turned into Sandy, but then, at the last moment, just as it was wavering, it had changed its mind and turned back again into Betty—round-faced Betty with spots, Betty whose hair was apt to be greasy at the roots, Betty who knew many secret flaws in her body and was ashamed of them.

Tonight Betty put Janey to bed at once.

"I found a book on the fire escape this morning,"

said Janey, slipping sideways to escape her doom.

"My goodness, that's no way to treat a book," admonished Betty. "Why did you leave it out?"

"Somebody climbed the steps and left it there."

"Now Janey, it's not nice to blame things on others."

Janey was undisturbed at not being believed. Her experience in this matter was vast, and she took a perverse pleasure in telling a truth that would be considered a lie. She even enjoyed mixing truth and lies together, and she now muttered, sticking out her underlip: "Mummie climbed out and put it there."

"Do you love your mummie?" asked Betty, who was given to asking indiscreet questions when alone with Janey.

But now Janey was absorbed in her fingers which she spread out and closed. "I can make my thumb disappear," she said.

Janey spoke, of course, with a foreign accent, the sweet, maddening accent of infancy, that land which all must leave and to which all cling, that country bordered by the womb, by the seed, by the ancestral blood. The wash of those red tide's still pound against the baby's ear and mix with the first stammering words of man. Obscure language, obstinate and shrill, Betty struggling in the last throes of adolescence understood but little of it. Yet she had the feeling as one does when eavesdropping or listening to an insane person that she might hear something important, something truer than ordinary conversation.

"Do you like my daddy?" asked Janey, looking at

Betty earnestly and almost with a frown. It would have been a frown had the skin on her forehead not been so new.

"Your father's a wonderful man," said Betty.

"Shall we pretend he's here?" suggested Janey.

Betty blushed. She had done exactly this with Janey once last spring but had never supposed Janey would remember.

"Hello, Daddy," said Janey.

"You must go to bed," said Betty, and was firm about it.

Then Betty got her glass of milk and took a chocolate bar from her purse. Instead of sitting down, however, she moved restlessly about the room, rubbing and pressing her arms as women often do. Although she wore a sweater, she felt cold, chilled with a sensation of unease. Perhaps it was the weather changing, or perhaps another mind than hers had filled the room with an unseen distress. For once she did not desire her chocolate. Her sweater sleeves itched and she pulled them back, exposing plump forearms covered with a dark neat down. Wheeling on an impulse, she saw that someone was standing in the doorway between bedroom and living room.

"Don't be scared. It's only me," said Sandy, and as though he owed her an explanation, he continued: "I came back. I left my wife to see the end of the play alone."

"Was it a bad play?" asked Betty, but her mind was racing back over her behavior of the last few minutes.

Had she done anything ungraceful or absurd? She turned red to the roots of her hair. He must have seen her scratching her arms like a monkey!

"Yes, it was bad," he replied. "But don't let me disturb your studies." He came in and sat down, taking off his glasses. His eyes, once naked, showed an almost feminine beauty which was at variance with the rest of his face. The lashes were long and darker than his hair, while between them the iris had an angelic tinge and glistened as with unshed tears.

"I wasn't studying," said Betty. "I couldn't somehow. I had a strange feeling, depressed and unhappy, but not personally." Betty was at the stage where she thought it captivating to describe the state of her soul. She believed it set her apart and that it would make men notice her. She continued, looking earnestly at Sandy. "As though a weight were pressing on me," she said.

"The most terrible thing in the world," said Sandy, nodding to her and speaking as if in comment, "is to discover that one can't build happiness. It's not a plant that one can water and watch grow. It's not anything to cherish. It can stop at any moment."

"Are you unhappy, Sandy?" asked Betty, but not aloud. Aloud she said in a voice that was just tinged with worship: "Mr. Hunter, you really understand things. Most men are so stupid."

He got up and with a tender sardonic gesture touched the curls which hung along Betty's neck. This act, which for a year after and even more Betty brought to

mind with a thrill, seemed to throw Sandy into a state of active pain. He pressed the palms of his hands together and walked back and forth. His lips, never full, were now pinched into a line. Soon, however, he spoke: "Betty, you will marry one day."

It was not a question but she murmured: "I guess so."

"Yes, you'll marry and you'll have children and be fulfilled in a woman's way."

Betty said bravely: "I'd need more than that, Mr. Hunter. I'd need intellectual contact as well as the other."

"Oh no," cried Sandy, "don't you see what a fool you are? No, not a fool, something worse."

"But why?" asked Betty, taken aback. "Why haven't I the right to be fulfilled in *every* way?"

"And the man?" countered Sandy, raising his voice. "What rights has he? Must he be fulfilled too, or only the woman?"

"Oh, he too," said Betty carelessly. "Of course." And her tone implied that men were always in that state.

Sandy, however, had turned his back and was staring out into the street. His voice came around to her, moody, almost tangibly dark. "You're right, I guess. The strong take what they want and only weaklings lack."

"But *you*, a person like you can have everything!" This sentence burst from the girl and she could not keep it in. Sandy's words, his expression, and most of

all the touch of his hand had wrought a change inside her body. An unplaced throbbing that is peculiar to bookish young girls made her lose control. A little more and she would have laughed or wept.

Sandy, however, faced her and said with resolution: "Betty, you must go home now. I'm here and there is no need for you to stay."

Going once more to the sofa, he picked up the portfolio. In his hands, as though alive, the pages turned until the last one fluttered over. Sandy had not seen this page before, or thought he had not. Who knew if just a fleeting glimpse of it had not entered the retina of his eyes?—had pierced them like those thin blades that can make a mortal wound without pain? Perhaps that was why, in the middle of the play, a compulsion had pulled him to his feet.

'But I must be dreaming,' he thought. 'Everything is so unreal.' Then, all at once, he was so sleepy that his eyes half closed. They would have closed entirely had he not noticed that Betty was still there. The notion that she too might have seen the drawings—in fact, she had not—made him defend himself instinctively.

"Betty, go home at once, please, and after this we won't need you again." He put all his effort into the words of dismissal and they sounded drowned in sleep or nausea as though they came from under water.

Betty left without daring to say a single word, and actually did not even get paid for her last evening.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO When Ellen returned that night the house was filled with sleep. She could even hear, standing just inside the door, the sound of breathing. She had been puzzled by Sandy's abrupt exit. He had simply leaned towards her and whispered: "I must go home now. You stay."

And with that he had pressed a little money into her hand. This was for the taxi fare, she supposed, but before she could question him further he was gone. For a few seconds Ellen could hear him pushing past the other people in their row, the sound of his trousers brushing against knees and the small clicking of

tongues from irritated women. Then he reached the aisle and was out of her ken.

How the play had finished Ellen hardly knew. A curious stillness seemed to envelop her, as though it had been waiting to descend on her until her husband had gone. She sat there with her head a little forward, her mouth sealed against speech, her eyes, empty of thought, reflecting without sense the stage story played out in front of her. She hardly clapped at the end, only striking her program once or twice against the back of her hand.

Now she was home, the last one awake in her house. She switched on the living room light and felt as she did so a chill pass across her, not up her spine, but rather as if an icy hand had been laid upon her breast. At the very instant the light went on, she saw the coffee table. The objects ranged on it were like a torrent of words poured out into these sleeping rooms, words that had been said and yet not spoken, words that could never be pronounced save by these lifeless things.

Ellen went over and sat on the sofa where, slowly in a bemused fashion, she touched the objects one by one: the little carving polished by her hands, the dead rose, black and pitiful, the silver pipe which had always seemed to gasp for breath. Lastly Ellen brushed her fingers across the drawing uppermost in the portfolio.

"If I were blind I could still trace those heavy lines," she said softly and aloud.

The drawing depicted a man embracing a woman.

The man, bulky, middle-aged, curiously gross, was quite obviously Zanic. The woman, shown from the back and almost obliterated by the arms around her, was nonetheless Ellen.

Ellen looked at this page for a long time. She could not quite figure out the details of the woman's clothing and this fact irritated her childishly. She was made uneasy, too, by the blows of her heart which burnt her breast at every stroke.

And why had Sandy laid out these evidences of a stranger's desire?

"There has been nothing, nothing," she said a little louder. "It's all in that man's mind, or used to be. Now he has managed to put it in Sandy's.

"Yet these are real things," she continued, staring down at the objects on the table. "I didn't bring one of them into my house and they arrived just the same." Leaning forward, she picked up the rose. "Sandy himself brought you," she said. But why had she kept this withered flower where anyone could see it, pressed beneath the glass of her dressing table? "Anyway I didn't know it came from *him*," she lied to herself. As though awaiting this deceit, the dead rose crumbled in her hand. Ellen started and dropped its dust onto the carpet.

Whether it was this incident or because the empty room was like a shell which one puts to the ear, Ellen fell into a reverie. It was one of those day dreams of the past that come suddenly without warning and are

so terribly clear. She was a young girl again, fifteen years old, walking beside the sea alone. The beach, backed by grassy dunes, was deserted. It was late spring. Ellen was walking barefoot on the wet sand, just at the edge of the waves. She felt again the coldness of her feet made tender by the scouring sand. The sea breeze, untainted by the buds of spring, blew into her mouth and nostrils. It was keen yet soft, heady as a cordial. On an impulse, smiling (the secret smile that she had kept), Ellen had crouched and with her finger had written her name and that of a boy she scarcely knew.

At once a wave larger than the rest came up and sucked away the names. Even at fifteen Ellen had felt chagrin for that moment and for all the moments on earth which are so brief and so soon washed away. Tonight, sitting on the sofa, the same feeling came over her. The room continued its hungry whisper in her ear and the objects on the table appeared not to lie but to crouch there, as though ready to spring.

"Why have I never asked how they got here?" she wondered, afraid to speak aloud any more. But the hungry shell-room devoured the words from her mind.

If Ellen had had any habit of thought, any discipline of the mind, she might have been able to free herself, but she was after all only a sleek, well-coordinated animal, with phantasy but no conclusions. She was a marionette whose strings were the nerves and glands in her own body. Had not Sandy thought so all along?

"Sandy . . ." Ellen said his name. Rising, she

went to the door of their bedroom and turned on the light. Sandy's head was pressed into the pillow and he was sleeping in a purposeful way, intent, absorbed, clinging almost visibly to slumber. He was curled around in the classic womb position which men often take when they are unhappy. His hands were closed into fists and drawn up near his mouth and his bony outline showed through the blankets.

Ellen first sat down near his head and then, on an impulse, stretched out beside him, fully clothed. Leaning on her elbow, she stared into his face, at his defenseless lids behind which his pupils rolled. This convulsive turning of the iris disturbed her. What was he trying to see behind his closed eyes? Or was it a dream that he was following with his regard? No matter which, it was delusion.

"Delusion," she said clearly into his ear, but he did not wake. His breath was audible, like a soft husky groan, and now Ellen put her face close and tried to drink these sounds out of his parted lips. She wanted to decipher the language of his sleep, to find out if she could get the true essence of his thoughts. Yet his soft groans were only breath.

She rolled over on her back. From the window the night air blew in cold and raw. 'Indian summer is over,' she thought, shivering. She stayed on there unable somehow to rise and get ready for bed.

Then for the first time she wondered: 'But where is it to be, and when?'



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE The Taras flat looked hardly any different this Sunday than it had the last or any other. There was the usual late-rising confusion about it. Anna scurried between them all, whisk broom in hand. Helen sat austere by the window, thinking of God. Joe rocked with open newspapers in front of him. Silver oiled his skates. Yet today there was a difference, for Maria was absent. Behind the normal holiday façade a tenseness lay, a sort of rumor that shook the air of the flat. Maria had borne a son.

"They say she won't be out right away," said Joe now from behind the sports page. "On account of the baby being born the wrong way around. —Complications," he added importantly and with a fond tone in his voice as though his son had already done something extremely clever.

"My," said Anna, jerking her head and ineffectually tidying the papers on the floor at Joe's feet. Then, turning a dark red which made the veins in her temple swell, she said: "Look Joe, I know it isn't quite the end of the month, but if you *could* see your way to letting me pay now—" Kneeling at Joe's feet, she turned her eyes this way and that while her trembling hands reached for the newspapers.

Joe gave her plenty of time and kept on smoking his pipe. He leaned back and then said at last like a prince: "Okay."

Anna smiled with relief and took the money at once out of the pocket of her housedress. Joe let her lay it on the table beside him.

Anna now felt obliged to explain. "I just happened to have it and then I realize Maria needs more care. I suppose," she said, forcing another smile, "that pretty soon you'll want me to be moving out altogether."

Joe did not answer—actually he did not hear—and kept on puffing at his pipe and reading the sports sheets, so Anna rose with a sigh and went in to make his bed. It was hard to have things come to an end—some things, that was. Others went on until they be-

came a part of one and there was no escape forevermore.

"Forevermore," she said in words, but not out loud, speaking rather to her own waiting soul. How short a time she had been free, short days followed by the devouring nights. She would not want to live alone, and lately, during the last few days, had felt that her reason for this had changed. Well, now the beds were still to be made, there was no time for introspection.

"Say, Anna," called Joe from the next room.

"Yes dear?" Anna trotted out.

"Anna, you're all dressed. Go out and telephone my brother-in-law, will you? Tell him I got a son in the night." He looked at her complacently and held out some change for the pay booth. There was no phone in the flat.

Anna hesitated. "Shouldn't you telephone him yourself, Joe?" she asked timidly, and was unable to help seeing that, aside from jacket and shoes, Joe was completely dressed.

But today Joe could not get over a kind of pasha complex which made him loath to move. Later he would go and visit his wife. He would bring Silver, too. He looked across at the boy who was still busy with his skates. Silver was using castor oil and now its powerful and sickening smell filled the room.

"Say, do you have to use that stuff?" asked Joe.

"Well, it really gets to them," said Silver, "and besides it's all I could find." He stood up. "I guess I'll go out now."

"We're going to see Maria, you and I," said Joe.

Silver flicked the dust from his knees. "I'm not, I'm going out and skate."

Joe gazed at the boy a minute in complete surprise. He might never have seen him before.

"Silver." Helen spoke from the depths of her meditation and without turning her head.

Silver started slightly, like a young horse at an unexpected sound. He raised his haughty profile abruptly, but made no move towards her, going instead to get his jacket off a hook near the door.

"Silver," Helen said again.

Silver stopped where he was, both aware and ignorant. Joe leapt to his feet. A strong emotion, irritation or else some other impulse of his man's heart, made his face darken.

"Can't you hear your mother's calling you?" he cried. Then, since the boy remained unmoving, he shouted: "Go to her, dammit!"

Silver went sullenly, but there was in his whole body, in his back, his limbs, his straight features, a sense of ease, an easing off of strain. As if, after these many years, he had found identity and could at last relax.

As for Helen, she gave a faint smile. Triumphant and sweet, it was mingled on her mouth with the traces of bitter disillusion. After Silver had come to her side, she put her arm around his waist and then, releasing him, said in a calm forceful tone: "Run and play now."

"She says you can go out now," muttered Joe, who had replunged himself in the newspapers.

"I *know*," retorted Silver, with the impatience that is common between brothers. "You don't have to tell *me* what she says."

Anna had come in upon this scene, this re-balance of the family life. It rocked her like one of those blows to the body that are caused by explosions or terrible storms. "They have all found each other," she thought sadly, standing in the doorway which was dark and where she could not be seen. "Joe need no longer pretend that Silver is his son. Maria can stop being jealous. Helen has been allowed to live again. Yes, they all possess and are possessed."

During this time Anna had not moved from the dark threshold. Her disease, the trembling and jerking of her limbs, gradually attracted the notice of the others, as one is made aware of an insect in the corner with his small, twitching life.

"Did you call Zizi?" asked Joe.

His question, interrupting the flow of Anna's thoughts and of her impressions, plumbed the anger inside her. "Yes I did, but don't bother me," she said.

Joe rose with a shrug. Old maids did get upset at times. It was the baby no doubt. The boy had made her think, probably. Putting on his shoes and wrapping a woollen scarf around his neck, he left the flat, followed by Silver on his skates.

Anna did not continue with the housework but sat

down, idle for once, in the chair Joe had vacated. She wanted, she needed, to think. Her hands were unable to relax and lay palsied in her lap. She looked down at them. What had they ever known of pleasure, of suaveness, of delight? Poor hands, she had given them nothing but a few calluses and a tremor. Was it her fault, she wondered, or the fault of some mysterious entity, the stars, or God? Anna had once heard of a great ship that had gone down in mid-ocean with almost everybody aboard drowned. Yet from that ship, they said, the lowered lifeboats were three-quarters empty. There had been place for many more.

This story, even upon first hearing it, had seemed to parallel the lives of such as she. When much younger, teen-age in fact, Anna had walked seven blocks to and from school each day. She had gone along Third Avenue with her awkward gait, scurrying just as she did now, already with something wrong about her, something stick-like in her limbs and something too long about the bones of her jaw. While walking, she had frequently been pushed aside by the crowd of laughing, talking boys, unconscious of rudeness, who thronged the avenue. From every side street, from trade school, from high school and university, they had gushed out, pouring beneath the El like the waters of youth.

And there had been in all that daily surge no one for Anna. There had been only Rhea.

This thought now dragged through Anna's mind

as a net is dragged from the ocean, bringing, aside from the expected fish, strange creatures from the deep.

Anna, concentrated inwards, had forgotten that Helen Taras was in the room and now she was startled by the old woman's face bending over her. Helen's eyes glinted and she seized Anna's hand.

"Come, we'll go and drink to the new son," she said, and although Anna could not know the meaning of the other's words, she let herself be led, docile enough, to put on her coat and leave the flat.

Helen's triumph had been mounting inside her for the last hour, but when she went to find her bottle of spirits it was empty. She had at once decided to go down to the bar across the street. A drink was her perfect need and she must have it at all costs.

'And I'll bring along that poor fool to talk to,' she had thought. 'What does it matter if she's too stupid to understand a real language.'

Their goal, when they reached it, was a small, unpretentious place. The bar, enclosed in its rail, made almost a circle in the middle of the room and there were a few, rarely used booths at the back. The two women went and sat in one of these, from which Helen called imperiously to the owner: "Gin!"

When it came she raised her glass. "To the new son."

Anna, although still ignorant of the other's meaning, followed suit and sipped the liquor. A trail of fire ran down her throat and made her cough. "I'm not used to alcohol," she said apologetically, "and it tastes

so nice." Then something in Helen's expression arrested her. "Why you're not *really* an old woman, dear," she said.

Helen might have understood this, for it is easy to decipher compliments, but she was taken with her own ideas. "To sons," she said in her Balkan tongue, "to sons all over the world." Her bold eyes flashed beneath their lids.

Anna drank a little more. The other woman's words sounded harsh to her, as foreign languages sometimes do, as though Helen were scolding her. "I can't drink any faster," she said. Actually the gin had begun to take effect.

"To the youngest sons," said Helen, draining her glass and calling for more.

The conversations, carried on apart, had had so far nothing in common, but now Anna, growing dizzy, said with a slight giggle: "Zizi gave me a message this morning." 'There,' she thought triumphantly, 'I've left off the Mr.'

"Zizi?" Helen caught the name. "Zizi's a good boy but he should make something of his life. Marte's a fool."

"And Ellen Hunter needn't think I don't see her there as plain as day," said Anna. She too finished her glass and held it out vaguely for refilling.

"I've never felt the same about daughters anyway," claimed Helen.

Anna's glass was refilled and she drank some more.

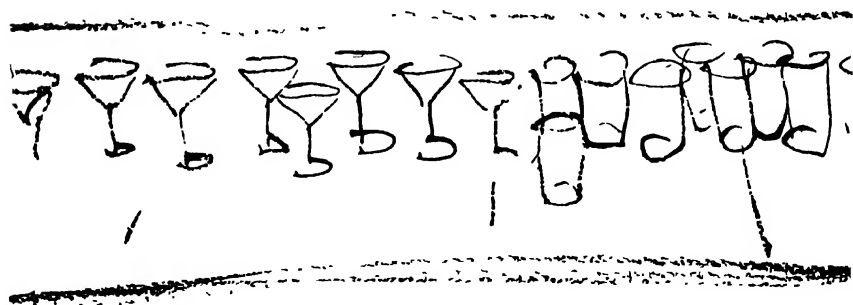
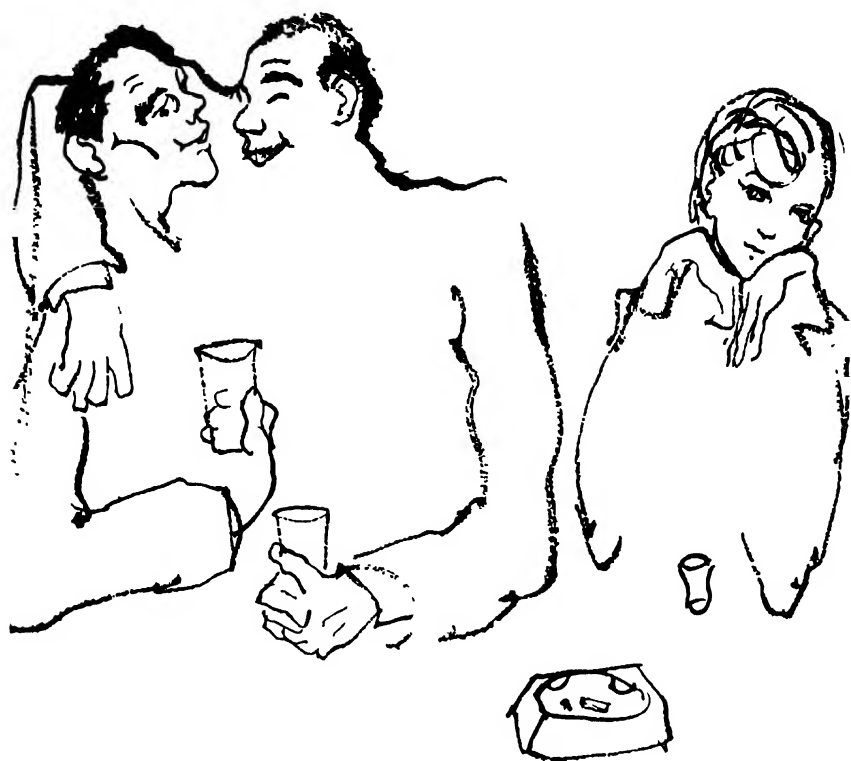
She perceived that her forehead was swollen and was pressing on her eyes. "He wants her," she continued in a sort of half whisper. "I understand. Rhea wants me—that's Ma, dear," she added kindly, leaning towards her companion.

Helen threw out her hand in an expressive gesture, abrupt but gracious. "Why, I'll even have to learn English now," she cried. "A boy needs to talk to his mother."

Anna leaned back again in her chair. "But what will happen to me? Will she let me stay, too—Rhea, I mean, dear."

"Why he might be a president," said Helen. "I know about American history. They can't fool me that they were always rich to begin with."

Anna, by lifting her brows, tried to keep them from pressing on her eyes. She wanted to look at Helen, but a strange doubling of lines in the other's face confused her. "What do you think, dear," she asked anxiously, "could even the soul be turned into just nothing?"



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR As for the Hunter apartment that same Sunday, there was a difference there too. Ellen, upon awakening, noticed it at once. In the first place she woke up late, at nine-thirty. Usually Sandy would have nudged her an hour ago, anxious for his small daughter's comfort. Since Abigail did not come on Sundays and Betty arrived only at noon, Ellen should have been dressing Janey and preparing breakfast for husband and child.

Today, however, the other half of the bed was deserted. Ellen felt a vague discomfort, as of guilt. 'But

I'm not guilty,' she thought, setting her jaw forward. 'I just won't think about it,' she decided. 'Besides, nothing has happened.' This statement, constantly repeated to herself, was like a drug, and even Ellen could not have said whether it was false or true.

Looking around the room, Ellen was surprised to notice how Sandy had effaced his personality. She was disturbed by this too. 'Usually he at least leaves his robe out, or anyway, yesterday's shirt,' she thought. Sandy's extreme neatness was now a voice in itself, a furtive sentence of secrecy and recession.

Rising at length, Ellen went to join her family. She remarked as she passed through the living room that the array of objects was gone from the coffee table, sketch book and all. She was astonished, not at this fact, but at the almost anguished dismay which assailed her. The emotion stemmed from the feeling that she could not recall the sketches clearly enough, and now they were gone. She had wanted, as she now realized, to look closely at the drawing of herself, as though in Zanic's interpretation of her she might discover her own secret, that reverse side which is kept hidden in every human creature.

Sandy, when Ellen came upon him, was in the bathroom, dressing Janey.

"Betty's not coming today," said Janey, struggling into the little cotton singlet that she wore in winter.

"Yes," said Sandy, busy fastening things, "she told me last night that she wasn't coming back."

"Not coming back?" repeated Ellen in surprise. She had never noticed Betty when the girl had been with them, but now that she was gone could picture her quite clearly: the soft, tumbling hair, the face flushed and disturbed by youth. "Is she getting married?" she wondered.

Sandy turned and looked his wife in the eyes. "No, she just doesn't want to come to our place again."

Ellen's heart gave a soft warning thud. When two people live together and there are secrets on either side, any ambiguous remark may have this result. Sandy, of course, thought he was giving Ellen a glance charged with an exact meaning, but because of the light which hit his glasses at an angle, she could not see his eyes at all.

"Will you miss Betty, Janey?" asked Ellen.

"Miss Betty," said the child.

Both parents were struck with remorse. One wasn't supposed to say that anybody had gone away for good. Actually Janey, not knowing what 'miss' meant, had simply repeated word and tone from her mother.

Nonetheless, despite their mutual feeling that it was wrong, Sandy and Ellen continued to use Janey as a buffer between them. She had never had so many little attentions and became quite impatient.

"You *know* I brush my teeth by myself," she said finally to her mother, who had taken up the tooth-brush. As usual she said 'teef' instead of teeth, but for once Ellen did not correct her.

"I said that wrong," said Janey, looking reproachfully at her mother.

"Have you had breakfast?" asked Ellen.

"Daddy gave it to me," said Janey, "and the cereal had lumps."

Unable to fuss with Janey any longer, Ellen spent the rest of the morning preparing an early lunch and straightening up the nursery. She could not bring herself to go into the front rooms where she knew Sandy was sitting at his desk. Even had she done so, however, Sandy would not have looked up. The truth was, neither of them felt like speaking to the other. New lovers can have lovers' quarrels, but there is less relief later. The loneliness of the human soul creeps gradually back and climbs into the marriage bed. All the private hopes and fears, the sands that run in their relentless flow, the wakenings at night, the separate irritations of the day: all these return when first raptures are over. They set a seal on confidence.

Then, too, Sandy, hunched over his desk and pretending to work, had been struck by a special memory, a memory which seemed in retrospect an act of treachery on Ellen's part. He recalled the day when, taking Janey to nursery school, she had spoken of a man who was always around. The fact that he had so feared for his child now made Sandy grind his teeth with humiliation. He had trembled at the thought that Janey might come to harm. As a man himself and a man who had

been to war, he knew only too clearly the blind urges of lust which appear to have no boundaries.

Yet all that morning when he had been worrying over his daughter, his wife's heart had lain within her bosom and been filled in all its chambers with deceit.

Sandy, his very nature being controlled and fastidious, soon felt the vividness of his feelings recede. A sense of weary distaste replaced them, not only for his wife but for himself as well. When Ellen called him to lunch, he went without a word and spent his time feeding Janey.

The child, who had rebelled against her mother's ministrations, now let her father feed her as a joke. She even pretended infancy, pushed away the spoon or let the food run down her chin. Between mouthfuls she looked at her mother with laughing eyes as if to say: 'We women know he's making a fool of himself.'

Ellen smiled back, grateful for these looks, and would have liked to hug her little girl, but she did not do so. She knew instinctively that Sandy could not have borne it.

Right afterwards Sandy took Janey to the park. He did not ask if Ellen wished to go and she herself made no motion. He had become very polite, and Ellen realized that this was the final tone for the day. Free, now that he was gone, to use the living room, she went and sat down on the sofa. Her feelings were confused.

'How dare he suspect me without even a question?'

she wondered, and then with her curious honesty: 'But would I like him to question me, after all?' Ellen could not or would not reply to this last self-probe. A question would mean an answer, a definition of facts spoken between Sandy and herself. Ellen shrank at this idea.

'That would end it all,' she reflected, and this sentence coming into her brain before she could stop it literally pulled her to her feet.

So far that day Ellen had not bothered to dress and, although she knew Sandy disliked such habits, had kept on a wrapper. Not by any means a hostess gown, the wrapper had actually belonged to her father, who was now dead. Of heavy foulard, it drooped off her shoulders, and she had rolled the sleeves almost up to their seams. The garment, with its air of old-time wealth and dandyism, emphasized Ellen's femininity. Its heavy colors brought out the ivory of her skin in which no tinge of rose was visible. But despite these virtues it had a sluttish quality about it, too.

Now Ellen discarded the wrapper for a suit and, taking up her change purse, left the apartment. She felt terribly in need of being among people. Also she wanted a drink.

As is usual when one has been in all morning, Ellen was surprised at the quality of the air outside and by the brilliant light which radiated from the hazy sky. It was early yet, barely afternoon, and the sun, although invisible, was still in the middle of the sky. There was

no wind but surely, one was coming, for the tree below the steps of No. 161 quivered slightly. Beneath it the leaves had been blown away or else swept into the gutter by the caretaker and their imprints remained on the sidewalk, like the marks of sooty hands that have been pressed against paper.

Ellen went down to a bar which, beyond Jack's booth, made the corner onto Third Avenue. She had often passed it but never gone in, since it was not one of Sandy's hangouts and she seldom went to bars without him. It would do though; any place would do, if it would only break the spell that she was under. She ordered bourbon.

The room was half full and the clients stood around in Sunday ease, talking to each other and drinking draft beer. They became intensely aware of Ellen, but she was so quiet and stood so neatly with the toe of her foot on the rail that after a few moments they relaxed. The serious business of these men was to drink. Mostly Irish, they had red faces and brindled hair. Several had noses marked by drinking, stained and pitted, with bulbous ends. The owner, who served Ellen, was one of these. His little eyes, still blue but swimming in red mist, gazed at his new client with a sort of friendly pride. He hoped all his steady customers would see her, the desirable ones, that was; she gave tone to his place.

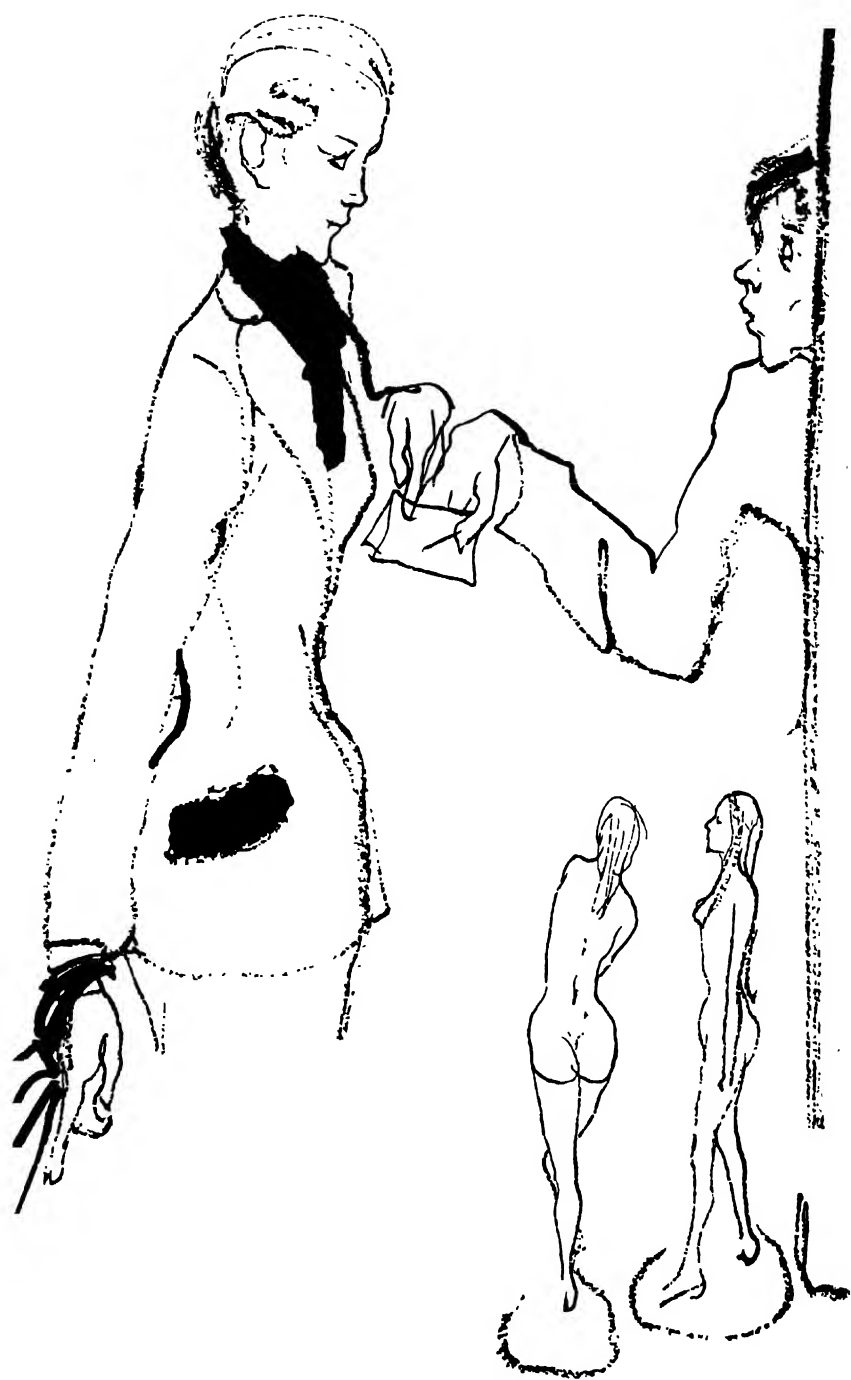
Ellen, on entering, had noticed two women seated in one of the booths, but it was not until she had almost

finished her drink that she turned to look at them again. In the dimmer light of where they sat, their features were obscured. The elder one was talking fiercely. The other, paying scant attention, was twitching restlessly, and it seemed as though she made a sign towards the bar.

Ellen put her shoulder between herself and the two women in the booth. She looked down into her drink, holding it in both hands and bending her head. As in a crystal she gazed into the bottom of her glass, which indeed was troubled, as though the future moved in the dregs. The men's talk around her was like a song which she was unable to catch; tantalizing, mysterious, it melted into the air, its meaning gone, its poetry diffused. The snatches of this melody reached her ears like music heard over water and made her feel remote and sad.

"Still, perhaps she didn't beckon me," thought Ellen. "She's always jerking and jumping away."

With a quick movement Ellen raised her glass and drained it. If the future had been manifest, it was now inside her, mounting in the stream of her blood and entering her brain.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE Monday the sky was blue again, as though Indian summer were bound this year in a cloth of azure. Ellen, on looking out, saw the sun shining on the buildings opposite and her heart felt washed and free like the morning. Perhaps the last fortnight had been nothing but a dream after all, a heavy dream brought on by mist and by the decay of nature. Even Sandy had seemed almost as usual when he kissed her goodbye. Ellen hummed a tune as she skipped past the disapproving Abigail, on her way to the bathroom.

'I won't take a bath this morning, I'll take a shower,

a cold one,' thought Ellen, 'or almost cold.' Her feet seemed barely to touch the floor, she was so light, and the blue of the morning, penetrating the flat from north to south, lent buoyancy to her body.

"Janey's caught a cold," said Abigail severely. "I wouldn't let her father take her to school."

"Never mind," said Ellen, "we'll put her in the sun and it will go away."

"It won't go away," said Janey through a red button of a nose.

But Ellen just couldn't care. She pulled the shower curtain and let the water run over her from head to foot, soaping first her hair and then the rest of her body.

'What *was* the matter with us?' she wondered. 'I can't remember.'

After she had dressed and dried her hair, she sat and entertained Janey. She cajoled and teased her little daughter until even Abigail smiled.

"You're in a very good mood, Mrs. Hunter, I must say," she remarked.

"Does it suit me?" asked Ellen, twinkling her eyes.

"Well, as to that I wouldn't know, but I do know that the way you've been mooning around lately didn't suit you at all."

"Oh dear," said Ellen. "But then how could you be happy, Abby dear, if there were nothing to criticize about me?"

"I'll thank you to remember, Mrs. Hunter, that my

name is Abigail, as christened in the Holy Church."

"But I can call her Abby, can't I, Abby," boasted Janey.

After a while Ellen went in and called Geraldine West. She was compelled to it by the same instinct that makes women clean out their closets. "Hello, Gerry," she said, "I need a winter coat."

"Well come and get one," said Geraldine. There was a note of triumph in her voice which intimated that she knew Ellen would call.

But Ellen was ready. "Oh, Gerry, I can't possibly get all the way over to your place. Send me a selection, why don't you?"

"Ellen," squealed Geraldine in the hysterical way women sometimes speak to each other, "Ellen, you *know* you have nothing to do all day long! Why not come right now— We'll have lunch together."

'She thought I was waiting to be urged,' Ellen told herself, almost laughing into the phone.

"I haven't time," she said, making her voice sound melancholy. "I have a home to run. Husband and child are work too, you know, Gerry."

"What a pity," said Geraldine, obviously stung and then, no longer able to contain herself, she went on: "And I was dying to tell you about the party I went to last night."

"You're always going to parties," murmured Ellen respectfully, "but it wouldn't have meant much to me. I hardly know that crowd."

"I went with Zanic." Geraldine, almost spat it out.

Ellen continued on as though she had not heard: "Anyway I don't like women's lunches," she said, "they bore me." She waited for a moment, but Geraldine was apparently too stunned to reply, so Ellen hung up, folding her wrist languidly over the telephone cradle and smiling. Her mouth that curved for this sly smile so well was suddenly made luminous by a square of sunlight which flashed across her face. She lay back on the pillow, basking in it and raising her arms above her head.

In the afternoon Ellen went out.

"Are you going to the market?" asked Abigail. "I've a list for you if you are."

"Well, I may and I may not," said Ellen.

Once outside she realized that the weather had grown cold as well as clear. A shaft of wind thrust itself through her coat and into her side. She put up her collar.

"Want a shine, Mrs. Hunter?" asked Jack.

"No thanks," she replied, "it's too cold to sit still."

"Mr. Hunter had one this morning," said Jack by way of persuasion. "So you've got a good example."

But Ellen walked on with a wave of her hand. 'How right of Sandy to have a shine,' she thought. 'It's a good omen.'

Then a light stopped her half way across Third Avenue. The shadow of the tracks above fell on her, cutting off the sun, and all at once the glory of the day

was obliterated. Turning her head, Ellen looked back at her home, which it now seemed she had never before observed. 'How small the block is, and how shabby!' she thought with surprise, and she wondered what had become of the houses of her childhood. Spacious and with winding corridors, she had taken it for granted they would always exist, they and their gardens, their roses wet with dew. But in that one tight city block hundreds of people lived, thousands even, stuffed in their rooms like fat men in thin men's clothes. "And of course I'm one of them," she reflected. For even if Sandy got richer, they could only have a bigger flat or a little house in the suburbs.

'Yet I wouldn't have married for money,' decided Ellen, still standing beneath the trestle. When one thought of marrying for money, one pictured a bald old man. But he could be young with glossy hair, and the bald old man, he too could be something else, could be the lover chosen from all the other men in the world.

As she thought this, a whirl of dust blew down the street and was trapped among the pillars of the trestle. Ellen's eyes blinked and she gritted coal between her teeth. It is said by some magicians that there are transformations from one order of matter to another, as, for instance, those strange plants that spring up above dead animals and resemble them. In this case, it was as though Ellen's thoughts had suddenly become visible, blown darkly into the world, lost and beating against concrete things, a confused eddy, undirected.

With an exclamation of disgust she hastened on across the avenue.

'Shall I go to the market?' she asked herself, unable to make up her mind. Perhaps the best thing would be to go home and telephone the A & P around the corner. The Hunters could charge there and sometimes did so. Then a very young man with down on his lip would stagger in with parcels, and she would be safe.

'Safe from what?' Ellen shrugged irritably. She could almost have stamped her foot. 'Just because his kin are there? Because his awful figures are on that idiot's shelf? What is it all to me, or to Sandy?'

Turning, Ellen gave a last look to her block. From this distance there seemed little difference in the quality of the buildings. Her own home was merged with all the others. Nonetheless, from the third floor of it, invisible threads stretched tenured to Ellen's heart. A poignant feeling such as one has at partings gripped her. Yet tonight, Ellen knew, she would be home again, would kiss Janey's face, and lie at her husband's side. The feeling of parting persisted, however, right down to the doors of the market.

There once more she hesitated. The wind was keen here, a hostile animal. It bit at the tender edges of her nostrils. Ellen dug her chin further into her collar, no longer breathing the fresh blast, but inhaling a warm scent which stirred between her inner and outer garments. This scent, half perfumed by the odor of her own skin, intoxicated Ellen. All the mystery of that

body to which one gave so little thought was here: the blood which courses, the bones laid joint to joint, the organs, the sinews, the lubric sweat. And it occurred to her that one day, in a few years, in an instant, the flick of an eye, all this turmoil would be quieted forever. A shudder that was almost languor took possession of her while she opened the market door.

Inside there was semi-darkness and the usual noises: the running tap, the rustling of women's feet as they hastened from stall to stall, the cries of the vendors. Now and then a sharp laugh, coarse and free, centered all sounds, a joke no doubt between a swarthy marketeer and some fat customer with children at her skirts.

These laughs, like beads on a string, seemed to draw Ellen from stall to stall—or rather, they were like those stations at which pious people, Christians and Buddhists, stop and pray, which dot their holy places. Wherever that robust laughter sounded, Ellen went and paused, wrapped in contemplation. She listened to the tail end of these salacious jokes, always in the same vein, and got the impression during such moments that some new quality was entering her soul. She fancied, too, that were she ever to be on the spot at the actual moment instead of its aftermath, some personal sign would be given her, an understanding, to unite her at last with the whole of humanity.

But perhaps all this speculation, these feverish ideas, only served to lead Ellen on around the market place and to permit her to avoid Anna's stall directly at the entrance.

Eventually Ellen arrived at the Taras booth where Helen alone was in attendance.

"Good evening, missus," said Helen.

Ellen looked at her in surprise. She had never heard the old woman speak English before and had supposed her incapable of doing so. 'But she's not really *old* at all,' thought Ellen, 'or not so old. She's good-looking, too. How funny that I never noticed it.'

Helen's black eyes opened for an instant as they met Ellen's yellow ones, not only the lids of them but the iris, the very pupil. It was the momentary interchange of women who communicate no other way, yet whose profoundest thoughts are visible in this one look.

Directly afterwards Ellen went up to the dry-goods stall.

"I made you a sign yesterday in the bar," said Anna, "but you never looked."

"I saw you," said Ellen, fingering a bunch of copper netting used to scour pans.

"I've got a message for you," said Anna.

"What if I don't want to hear it?" demanded Ellen, throwing up the copper ball quite high and catching it again. And how typical it was of Ellen to be able to catch the ball so easily after throwing it so high, unhurriedly, hardly looking, with her gloveless hand whose wrist bone showed beyond her coat cuff.

"Oh but you do, dear. You do want to hear it," Anna assured her earnestly. She was not exactly facing Ellen,

yet her eyes, as much as they could focus on anything, were fixed on that frail, moving wrist.

Ellen kept on with her occupation and made no remark.

"I always used to think," said Anna, "that it would be a terrible experience—possession I mean, dear—but it isn't, you know. A part of you watches all the time." She leaned forward, adding confidentially: "And it doesn't last, dear. They go away again after awhile."

The tone of voice in which Anna spoke was that used by women when they discuss female health together. Ellen was vaguely repelled by it, yet she was not at all surprised by the seeming nonsense of the other's words. In fact they appeared to be the only concrete sentences she had heard for days. They imparted meaning, not to her reason or to her reflecting powers, but rather to an instinctive part of her senses—a part reached only by such words as these and by the now powerful throbbing of her heart.

"So you think I should be—possessed?" she demanded with her mocking half smile. She looked down and then up through her lashes, a sort of flirting through proxy.

Anna did not heed the question. "But then you never know," she continued, her head jerking almost gently on its neck. "I mean, you wonder if that's *all*."

Ellen felt a physical twinge of impatience at these digressions.

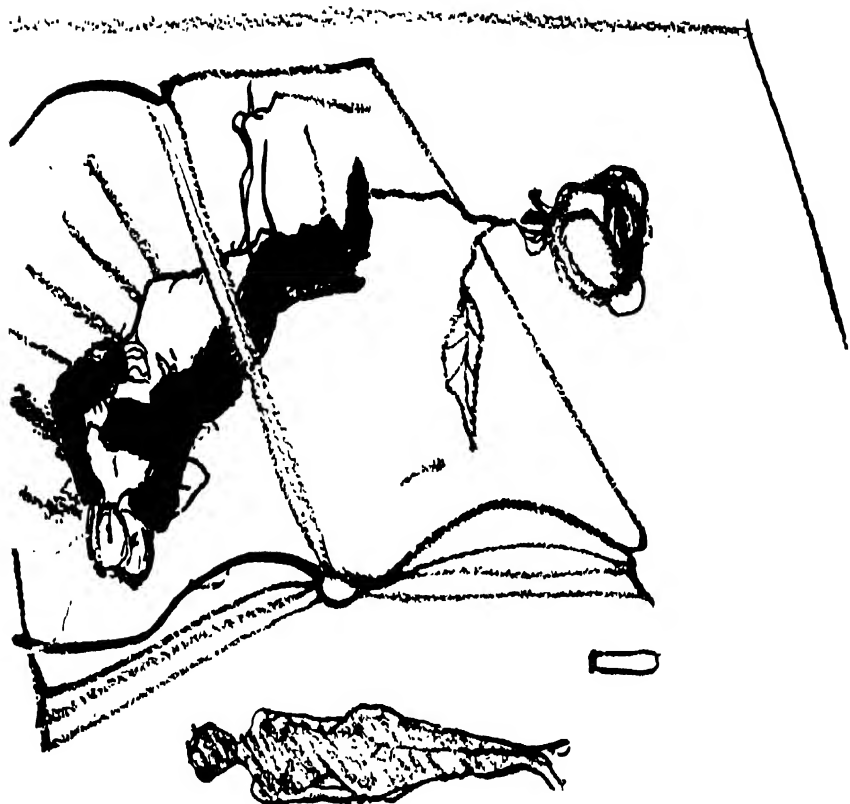
"Oh," cried Anna as though she had noticed Ellen's nervous little shrug, "I was forgetting my message. It's just the address, you know."

"What about the date and hour?" asked Ellen. Anna's words had filled her with panic, but this panic was only for one thing: *Anna might not know enough*. She burned with a sensation that was near to that of thirst.

Anna looked surprised. "I thought you knew, dear," she said. "You'll have to hurry. He goes home at six."

Ellen clutched the copper ball tightly. "You couldn't have known I'd come today," she cried.

Anna replied patiently: "Why of course I knew you'd come. You'd have to, wouldn't you, to get the message?"



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX The address Anna gave Ellen was over in the West Fifties and Ellen took a taxi.

She pressed herself into the corner and leaned back as though tired, sighing once and stretching out her legs. The time for reflection, for self questions and answers was over for Ellen, and the sensations of her body came to absorb her in their place. Her feet were icy cold and from time to time a new chill, descending from her bowels, would lave them as with water from a glacier. How fast the taxi went! Eating up the streets. Fast yet not fast enough. The red lights were like an insane stupidity on the part of the city, but when the cab stopped at its destination it was too soon.

Ellen paid the cab and stepped out onto Fifty-first

Street. Because of the trucks that lined it, her taxi had not let her out at the exact address and she had to walk.

'What if I had forgotten the number?' thought Ellen with a surge of panic at the idea.

Mostly garages and parking lots, the houses had all of them a same unfamiliar look, while on the other side of the street a great theatre presented its fire escape and its stage door. The sidewalk was filled with men; small men with quick eyes who hurried, lounging men leaning against a garage door, chorus boys in orange make-up. There was no escaping any of them, any of their remarks, any of their knowing glances which seemed to guess what she was doing as though it had been written on her brow.

At length—and really in a few seconds—she reached the door whose number had been given her by Anna. This building, too, was a garage, the top and second floor of which had been rented as a studio. The door was painted red and underneath the one bell was Zanic's name. Ellen rang and immediately a clicking sound released the catch and she entered onto a wooden staircase.

Because of an unexpected weakness of her knees whose tendons and whose nerves seemed to have relaxed, Ellen helped herself up by means of a dusty rail which splintered her hands and blackened them. Twilight was perpetual in this mounting corridor and only a rectangular opening above showed the light of day. Now this rectangle was blotted out by Zanic's bulky figure.

"Who is it?" he called down, unable to see into the dark well.

Ellen made no reply but slowly mounted until he saw for himself.

"Oh, it's you. Come in," he said in such an ordinary, even kindly, tone that Ellen was startled. The fleeting thought crossed her mind that it was natural to see a sculptor's work in his studio.

Then at this base cowardice her heart revolted and she walked boldly past him and into the room.

"So this is your studio," she said, looking around and trying to throw herself into its atmosphere, to breathe at ease, as it were, in this unfamiliar element. She was like those fish who leap from the ocean and seem, with their convulsed gills, to be straining to tolerate the air above.

The studio was nothing but a bare single room uncertainly lit at one end by two windows whose sashes rattled loosely in their frames. It was warmed by pipes from the garage beneath and perhaps, too, by the boiling heat of Broadway which penetrated it from those loose windows. There was a couch in one corner and a few straight chairs, while all around were mounds of clay covered with wet cloths. Some of these were formless lumps, but others were mounted on wheeled pedestals so that they had, along with their partly human forms, a sort of slow mobility.

Ellen advanced towards the center of the room and then turned to look at her host who had followed her only to the threshold. The light which fell on her face

was tarnished by the miasma of the street outside, like the fevers which rise from swamps, and either this or else a faintness in her own system gave her skin a luminous quality, almost grey. From it her golden eyebrows, her yellow eyes, stood out with the blond treachery of a lioness.

Zanic now moved forward. He was dressed for work in a shirt and blue cotton pants belted low. Above the belt his paunch looked like a necessary muscular hardness, and there was an easy grace in his step apparent in these clothes. The black thick lock of his hair fell over his eyes, obscuring his forehead and his expression.

Still facing him, Ellen began slowly and as one hypnotized to undress, taking off her coat and dropping it to the floor. Then, with the suppleness that nothing could take from her, she pulled her dress up over her head. She was smiling slightly, but it might have been the grimace which accompanies such efforts. Zanic took her in his arms and carried her to the couch. There, without waiting, he fell upon her, burying his great mouth on her bosom as though to devour the nipples of her breast.

The sweat from his shirt wet her arms and her throat, while below she felt the searching thrust of his body against hers, joint to joint. Ellen closed her eyes for fear that if she opened them tears would fall, but she could not repress the shudders of desire that shook her to the bone.